

US veterans use writing to tame trauma

Red Badge Project starts with humor

By KATHY ANEY
EO Media Group

PENDLETON — Skip Nichols walked to the podium, breathed deeply and shared one of his most agonizing life experiences.

Nichols, a Vietnam veteran and retired managing editor of the East Oregonian, had cobbled together the words during a Red Badge Project writing workshop and later agreed to share them with an audience at the Gesa Power House Theatre in Walla Walla. On Friday night, he joined five other workshop participants, two Red Badge instructors and actor Tom Skerritt, who served in the Air Force. The Emmy-winning actor co-founded the Red Badge Project as a way to help veterans struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder find their voice and reboot their sense of purpose.

At the podium, Nichols morphed back into the 19-year-old Marine he once had been, standing guard with two other soldiers near the perimeter of Camp Carroll, just south of the demilitarized zone. They noticed a boy on a water buffalo heading toward the concertina wire encircling the camp. The sight put the soldiers on edge. The boy, who appeared to be about 12, carried a bamboo cane to prod the water buffalo and had arms and legs that were "little more than sticks." A brown cloth bag hung from his neck.

"Did it contain rice balls, a satchel charge or hand grenades?" Nichols remembered wondering. "Were we looking into the eyes of the enemy or an innocent boy?"

Nichols, a radio operator and interpreter, radioed his captain for instructions. Hold fire until the water buffalo reaches the wire, the officer said, then shoot. Boy and beast continued forward. Nichols yelled at him in Vietnamese to turn back, but the pair kept going until reaching the perimeter fence.

"Time seemed to stand still," Nichols read aloud to the audience. "And then, as one, all three of us fired. The boy's body shuddered. His right arm flew up as if waving good-bye to us."

The water buffalo charged forward, Nichols said, dragging the boy's limp body through the concertina wire. The men shot the animal and "puffs of red mist briefly filled the air." The water buffalo staggered and fell atop the boy.

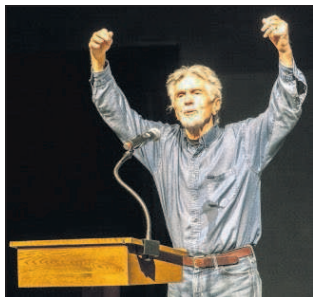


Vietnam veteran and retired East Oregonian Managing Editor Skip Nichols reads a story he wrote during a Red Badge writing workshop for veterans with PTSD. He and five other veterans shared their work Friday at the Gesa Power House Theatre in Walla Walla.

Photos Kathy Aney/EO Media Group

'Telling your stories can save you from the well of anger inside you, but only if you are willing to share. You have to invest your heart.'

Joseph Wankelman
Army veteran from Colorado



Actor Tom Skerritt speaks about the Red Badge Project on Friday at the Gesa Power House Theatre in Walla Walla. Skerritt co-founded the project, which helps veterans with PTSD find their voice.

Vietnam veteran Bob Park, of Helix, reads a story he wrote during a Red Badge writing workshop for veterans with PTSD. He and five other veterans spoke at the Gesa Power House Theatre in Walla Walla.



"Then there was silence. I remember thinking it was the silence of death," Nichols read. "My hands were shaking."

Nichols' next sentence ushered the audience into his own personal gut-wrenching reality by revealing one more incomprehensible truth.

"We later learned the boy had been mentally handicapped since birth," Nichols said. "He had simply wanted chocolate like the kind we gave out while we were on patrol."

Nichols left the stage to applause. Many of those clapping looked emotional

at this glimpse of wartime experience.

PTSD

Like many returning warriors, Nichols deals with PTSD. He's spent time in counseling and even returned to Vietnam as a way to cope. Many, however, never find their way past the flashbacks, nightmares and depression. Many — some reports say as many as 22 veterans per day — commit suicide.

Actor Tom Skerritt, known for leading roles in "Top Gun," "A River Runs Through It," "Alien" and other films, co-founded the Red Badge

Project after having dinner with some Colorado veterans affected by PTSD.

"They were physically and emotionally wrecked," Skerritt said. "They looked around furiously. They couldn't engage. That stayed with me."

The result was the Red Badge Project, a way to tap into imaginations and feelings and slay the beast within through writing.

"You can't intellectualize this stuff," Skerritt told the Gesa Power House audience. "You just have to feel."

He and co-founder Evan Bailey avoided heavy mem-

ories at first during the workshops.

"We started with laughter," Skerritt said. "We passed out joke books to a bunch of angry soldiers."

The men took turns telling jokes. Later, they progressed to "Yo Mama" insults like "Yo Mama is so old, she was a waitress at the Last Supper."

"As they laughed, they got better," Skerritt said.

The men and women wrote about positive parts of their lives and then dared to examine painful memories and write about them, too.

One of the presenters, Bob Park, a retired teacher from

Helix, confronted death during the writing workshop. He'd seen plenty of it after being drafted in 1965 at age 21 and serving in Vietnam. He earned a Bronze Star for surviving a helicopter crash and pulling others to safety before the helicopter caught fire. He survived fierce firefights that others did not.

Park, however, wrote not of wartime, but of the deaths that had rocked his boyhood — an aunt who battled cancer, his beloved dog, and his brother who died after being hit by a car while riding his new bike.

"There is no beauty in dying, only in the memories that are left," Park read to the audience.

Narrow tunnel

Another veteran, Bryce Ely, read an essay in which he recalled dropping to his knees and crawling through a tunnel. Carrying only a .45-caliber pistol, his knife and his flashlight, he inched ahead.

"The air grows stale and heavy with the smell of musty dirt, the smell I knew as a kid hiding in the crawl space under my house during childhood games of hide-and-seek," he read.

The tunnel narrowed. Sweat stung his eyes. Imaginary spiders crawled on his skin. He fought back panic as he got temporarily wedged before corkscrewing his body from the tunnel's grip. Finally he saw light and the end of the tunnel. He reached the opening and peeked out into a void, a cliff that went straight down.

"Holy s---," he said as the closing line.

Another veteran, Lydia Hales, wrote of living with depression and PTSD after suffering a traumatic brain injury. She wrote of her battle to simply do the things others consider normal.

"I want to sleep without dreams, without being haunted by specters of the past," Hales read.

Joseph Wankelman, a young Army veteran from Colorado who was photographing the event for Red Badge, listened in the back of the theater with a somber expression. Red Badge, he said in a low voice, had saved his life.

"Without it, I'd be strung out on drugs or alcohol," Wankelman said. "Telling your stories can save you from the well of anger inside you, but only if you are willing to share. You have to invest your heart."

Red Badge works in concert with military psychiatric programs at Veterans Administration Centers such as the Jonathan Wainwright VA Medical Center in Walla Walla. Veterans wishing to participate should contact their local VA center.

VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

4-H — Looking for 4-H leaders. For information, call Sandra Carlson at the Oregon State University Extension at 503-325-8573.

American Red Cross — Needs registration volunteers (donor ambassadors) in Clatsop County to provide customer service and enhance the blood donor experience. For information, call Angela Basurto at 503-528-5430.

Astoria Column — 1 Coxcomb Drive. Volunteers needed to welcome visitors, provide information and answer questions about the Astoria Column and the city of Astoria. For information, call the Friends of the Astoria Column Visitor Center at 503-325-2963.

Astoria Riverfront Trolley Association — 111 W. Marine Drive. Needs conductors/motomen to operate trolley and narrate points of interest. One or more three-hour shifts per month. For information, call the 503-325-6311.

Astoria Senior Center — 1111 Exchange St. To volunteer, call Larry Miller at 503-325-3231.

Astoria-Warrenton Area Chamber of Commerce — 111 W. Marine Drive. Volunteers needed at the chamber and for events. For information, call 503-325-6311.

Camp Kiwanilong — A large variety of volunteer opportunities are

available. For information, call 503-861-2933 or go to www.campkiwanilong.org

Caring Adults Developing Youth (CADY) Mentoring Program — 800 Exchange St., second floor. Needs mentors for youths ages 10 to 17 at risk of school failure. Time commitment: one year, about eight hours per month. For information, contact Laura Parker at 503-325-8601 or lparker@co.clatsop.or.us

Clatsop Animal Assistance

Inc. — Needs volunteers who have a strong commitment to work on behalf of the Clatsop County Animal Shelter's dogs and cats. For information, email info@dogscats.org or call 503-861-0737.

Clatsop Care Center — Volunteers needed daily for all three meals to provide one-on-one assistance to dining dependent residents. Volunteers must participate in a 16-hour training program. For information, contact Mandy Brenchley at 503-325-0313, ext. 209.

Clatsop County Animal Shelter — Animal care volunteers age 16 and older needed for one 3-hour shift per week. Pick up an application at 1315 S.E. 19th St., Warrenton. For information, or to schedule orientation, call Leslie Atkinson at 503-325-1000.

Clatsop Community Action Regional Food Bank — Volunteers needed to help hand out fruits and vegetables at the weekly produce pantries for two hours on Thursdays, from April to October, in Seaside and

Warrenton. Warehouse attendants are needed for food packing or processing, picking orders for agencies, light janitorial and housekeeping, or lawn and grounds maintenance. Three to four-hour shifts are available Monday through Friday. To volunteer, call 503-861-3663.

Clatsop Community College Outreach Literacy — Needs volunteer literacy tutors to work with adults, native and non-native speakers. Training available. For information, call 503-338-2557.

Clatsop County Public Works — 1101 Olney Ave. Adopt-A-Road volunteers needed to remove litter two times (minimum) per year for two years. Safety equipment and supplies provided. Volunteers must receive safety orientation. For information, call 503-325-8631.

Columbia Senior Dinners — 1111 Exchange St., Astoria Senior Center. Volunteers needed weekdays to serve tables and for kitchen help. To volunteer, call 503-325-9693.

Pet Parade
to celebrate the final stop on
Crazy Stan's 300 Mile Walk for the Animals
July 15th 2017 at Noon
on Bolstad Beach Approach

Everyone Can Participate
in the Pet Parade!

Prizes For
Crazy Stan Lookalike
Beachiest Pet
Best Trick • Best Costume
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Visit tinyurl.com/y7t9tnn7
for more details.

300 Miles
10 Rescues
May 27 - July 15

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in The Loft
At Suzanne Elise
Tuesday, July 11th
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Call Heather at 503-738-0307
to reserve your spot
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