

A Court for At-Risk and Suffering Vets

Peer mentors reach out to those trying to cope

BY CARI HACHMANN
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Larry Phelps was welcomed back from Vietnam like many soldiers returning from the violent and controversial war, with post traumatic stress disorder and a cold shoulder. Forty years later, he is still learning to cope.

After the war, Phelps felt secluded from society. Even now he avoids social contact as a way to control his symptoms of anger, aggression, and erratic behavior. "I don't like people," he said, "I stay isolated." When Phelps finally went to Veterans Affairs in 2004, after an injury caused him to have a mental breakdown, he was diagnosed with PTSD.

For Phelps, every situation is a matter of life or death; a possible conflict around every corner. He frequently has panic and anxiety attacks. Since the war, he has been dismissed from 37 jobs and has lost contact with his two daughters and only family.

"It's hard to deal with somebody with PTSD, because anything sets you off," said Phelps, who has trouble trusting authority figures. "I don't function very well in society."

In 2011, a DUI charge brought Phelps to the Clark County Veterans Court, which opened last spring as one of three therapeutic courts in Washington to offer alternative treatment and sentencing for vets with mental disorders.

Veterans facing misdemeanor charges who also suffer a mental illness and/or substance abuse have the option to plead guilty in therapeutic court with Judge Zimmerman, and then undergo treatment rather than serve jail time.

It's estimated that out of 40,000 veterans in the Vancouver area, less than one percent encounter legal issues, with countless more at risk.

A \$350,000 grant from the U.S. Justice Department will allow the court to see up to 50 incarcerated or at-risk veterans over the next three years. As

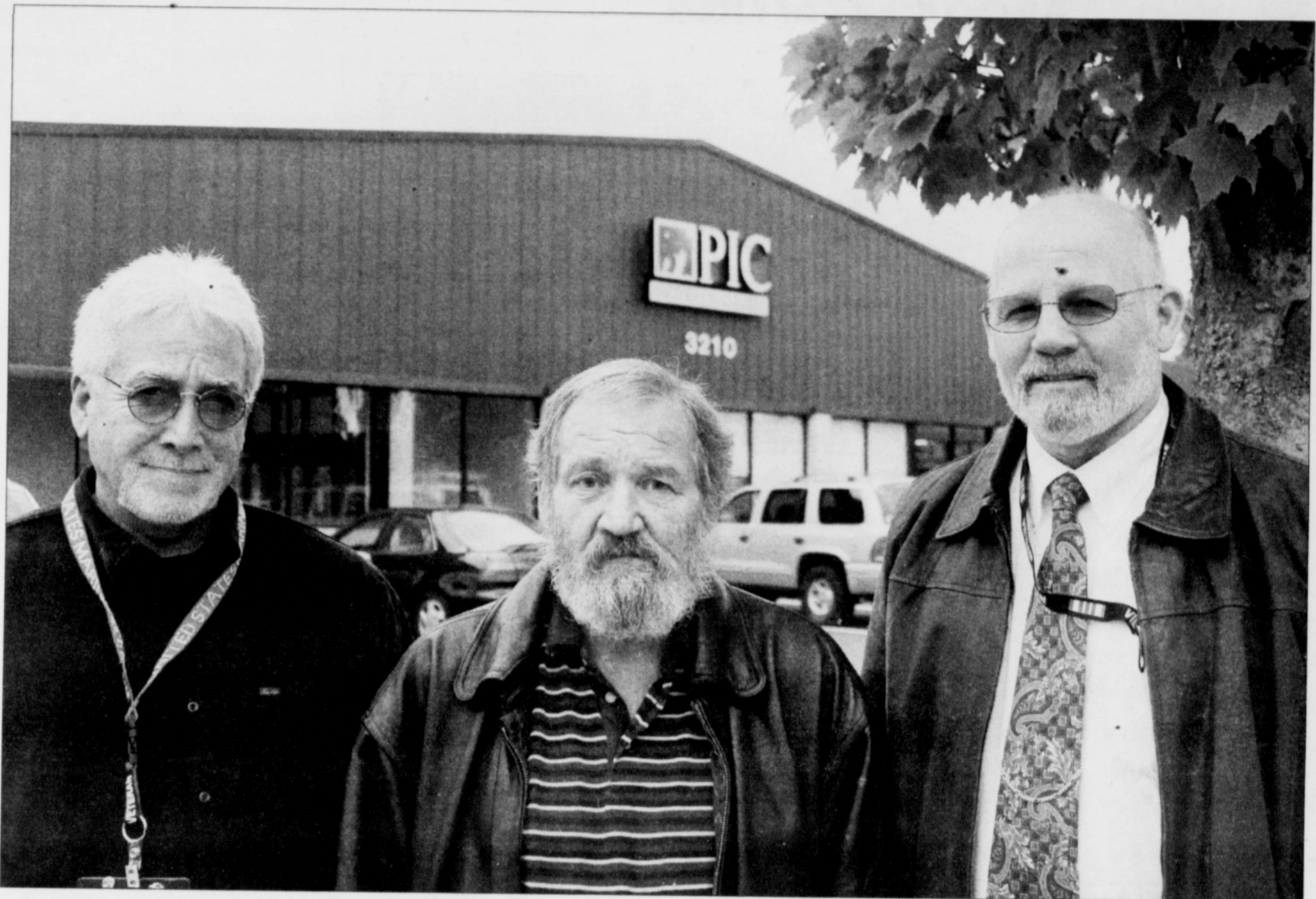


PHOTO BY CARI HACHMANN/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER
Hugh Casey (from left), Larry Phelps and Mike Wilbur led dissimilar lives after service in the Vietnam War, but now all share a common experience with their involvement with Clark County's Veterans Court.

part of their treatment program, veterans are matched with peer mentors, or volunteer veterans that have been honorably discharged, to help guide them through the justice process.

Currently, the court serves 14 veterans with 8 peer mentors. Many within the court's system believe peer mentors are the best chance for a veteran's success.

"A lot of veterans are lost when it comes to receiving services," said Mike Wilbur of the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs. "If we guide them through the convoluted system, it takes away a layer of stress, and they can focus on recovery."

Stress takes a toll on returning soldiers. Men and women who join the military at a young age are taught quickly to take orders, think collectively, and work as a unit. During combat, when the unit undergoes strife together, the group becomes a closer knit group, explains Wilbur.

When veterans come home, they may grieve that loss of camaraderie and bond to their fellow soldiers.

"Some veterans feel ignored;
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