

# Coping at War and Peace

continued **▲** from front

doesn't like to show emotion. She also gets emotional about things that would have never bothered her before.

Only recently has she begun to recognize her symptoms and triggers, and to reach out for help, "I'm trying to break it down and understand it. I was oblivious."

Vietnam veterans have dealt with PTSD for 40 years without knowing, she said. "They open the door for everybody, for us."

Rivera says she knows there are a lot of vets still stuck in denial, and the number of suicides from active and retired military has taken a heavy toll. She hopes to see the stigma of PTSD abolished.

Rivera is happy with the quality of care Portland's Veterans Affairs has provided, but says the VA is "overwhelmed." Some services are not up to date. From the war, Rivera suffers severe back pain and migraines.

Not wanting to take the pain killers the VA offers, Rivera paid out of pocket for holistic treatments like acupuncture, chiropractic care and massage therapy.

She was referred to the Returning Veterans Project, a southeast Port-



Veteran and U.S. Marine Corps helicopter mechanic Marissa Rivera.

land non-profit started in 2005 by social worker Carol Levine, which offers free and confidential mental health and somatic services to veterans and families of vets.

"Only about 40 percent of all vets go to the VA (Veterans Affairs), 60 percent do not," says Belle Landau, executive director of the Returning Veterans Project, "We help to fill that gap."

While returning soldiers may wait

up to 12 months to receive services from the VA, the returning vets group has 142 volunteer care providers throughout Oregon that are ready to help current war vets and family members get healthy without cost.

Thanks to the group, Rivera is closer towards being pain-free. "To finally have one day of relief... I can't even describe the feeling," she said. "It makes me very happy."

While surrounded by male marines in the military, Rivera said she let go of her bonds with women. "I lost touch with women and my femininity," she said.

When she and her husband, who also suffers from PTSD, but is not diagnosed, moved to Portland, the couple was looking to start life fresh and find new hobbies.

He found fishing. She found an all-women's fitness facility that offers dancing. The activity has helped her come out of her bubble and reintegrate into society.

"Dancing is my therapy," she said. "Women helped me there. I love those women."

Currently unemployed, Rivera is waiting to be hired back by the VA Medical Center. Working there has inspired her to go back to school

and become a counselor.

"Working with veterans, that's my passion," she said.

Rivera says she loved her time in the military. "I don't regret it," she said. "It was definitely a life-altering experience. There were hard times. It's not easy for females." But she was able to grow from her experi-

blood kin.

She believes it's time for them to come home. "I think we need to get out of there, enough have died."

And when they come home, Rivera says we should welcome them back.

"People should take a look at themselves and veterans, and ap-

*People should take a look at themselves and veterans, and appreciate what they've done. Because they will never fully understand the sacrifices that are made by vets.*

— Marissa Rivera, Veteran and U.S. Marine Corps helicopter mechanic

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Though her view on war has changed, calling it "a horrible thing that does horrible things to people," Rivera has made many long-lasting friendships. She says her military brothers and sisters are closer than

precipitate what they've done," said Rivera, "Because they will never fully understand the sacrifices that are made by vets."

Thank veterans for their services, she said, "We need support from the community."

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