

## Serving again: Vietnam veteran who battled mental illness uses experience to aid other veterans



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In the 1960s, Alice Holstein broke gender barriers as an Air Force intelligence officer. Years later, she fought demons inside her head.

Now she's trying to help other veterans overcome mental illness. As one of the Veteran Administration's new peer support specialists, Holstein, 66, uses her life experience to connect with other veterans and help them get services they need.

Holstein grew up in La Crosse, where her father ran a title company. In 1965, after graduating from the University of Wisconsin in Madison, she joined the Air Force.

"I really wanted to serve my country," she said. "I wasn't the Peace Corps type, but I wanted to serve."

And in those days the military was one of the few places where women could get equal pay.

As an intelligence officer, Holstein briefed B-52 pilots in the Strategic Air Command at Clinton-Sherman Air Force Base in Oklahoma.

As the first woman to run a bomber wing-level intelligence shop, Holstein said her arrival caused a stir, but she won the pilots over by telling them they could keep their girlie pictures so long as they didn't give her any grief.

"I just put my head down and worked," she said.

Holstein made another first when she accompanied the unit overseas - to Guam in 1968 and Okinawa in 1969. By then she had mixed feelings about the war in Vietnam. She would brief the pilots on their missions and then watch the hawkish jets take off.

"I'd watch them go in wave after wave and wonder what this was all about," she said. "But you have a job to do."

Holstein left the military and returned to school, earning a master's and then a doctorate in organizational development. She taught at the University of Northern Colorado and developed her consulting practice.

In the late 1980s, she started having "creative surges," sleeping only a few hours a night and writing, neglecting her business. She wrote a book, but soon lost all her clients.

By 1995, her behavior became more outrageous.

She took things from friends' homes. She wandered away from her Tucson home, gripped by paranoia of a vast conspiracy that included police. She went on spending sprees, buying carloads of clothes, gifts for friends she no longer had. She bought a Ford Bronco she didn't need. Then, on a trip to Colorado, she bought a van when the Bronco wasn't big enough for all her stuff. At other times she suffered debilitating depression.

Friends urged her to see a psychiatrist, who diagnosed her with manic depression, now called bipolar disorder.

Holstein said it took years before doctors found a medication that worked. She gave up her health insurance when her monthly premium hit \$950. She racked up thousands of dollars in hospital bills.

In 2002, during an episode where Holstein spent time living on the streets, she got on a bus for La Crosse, where she still had some family friends.

After nearly two decades of "devastating, horrendous" illness, Holstein said through medication and alternative healing therapy she was stabilized in 2006.

That was the year that she began talking openly about her illness, in part to explain her erratic behavior, and framing her recovery as a spiritual journey. She spoke at a VA health fair, where she met Michael Brandt, a VA psychologist who runs the mental health clinic on Losey Boulevard.

Brandt told Holstein about a new peer support position the VA was developing and suggested she apply.

The peer support role was part of the VA's emphasis on recovery and designed to bridge the gap between professional psychologists like Brandt and veterans. Not only would they be veterans, they would have been through recovery - from mental illness or substance abuse.

"What it offers is credibility," Brandt said. "I have 19 years of practice in the field of psychology, but I don't have much lived experience."

Holsteins' education and expertise in organizational development added to her qualifications, Brandt said.

In a year with the VA, Holstein has developed a guide to community resources and helped veterans find volunteer opportunities. She's served on steering committees to develop a veterans court network and La Crosse County's mental health crisis center, which is set to open in 2010.

Human Services Director Jerry Huber said Holstein challenged professionals like himself to think about the delivery of mental health services from a consumer's perspective. She brought up questions: Is it necessary to treat those in a psychiatric crisis like criminals in handcuffs? Should a crisis center look like an institution or a home?

"Not too many people have two sides of the story," he said. "It can be a humiliating experience."

Holstein feels blessed to have the job and to be able to contribute to her community. Four years ago, after losing her job as a reference librarian, she assumed her work life was over.

Now she has a chance to serve her country one more time.

"I'm not defined by this illness," she said. "I had a life before, and I'm very fortunate to have a life of solid recovery."