

Alice Holstein, a peer support specialist at the VA River Valley Integrated Health Center in La Crosse, Wis., broke gender barriers in the Air Force.



Returning to a Life of Service

Once sidelined by mental illness, Alice Holstein has found a renewed sense of purpose serving veterans.

As an intelligence officer in the Air Force during the Vietnam War, Alice Holstein broke barriers. Stationed at various military posts, including Guam and Okinawa, she was the first woman to be sent overseas with B-52s. She was also the first woman to brief satellite photography and the first woman to be sent to a bomb wing level, where she managed a combat wing intelligence shop.

She quickly realized that being the first woman wasn't always a good thing. She was living in a fishbowl and she didn't like it. "It wasn't my goal to be the first," said Holstein. "It was really happenstance. To be a woman and be watched all the time—they expected you to fail. There was a lot of pressure. But the military taught me how to dig down in the face of challenges and find out who you really are. You strive to be your best."

Holstein knows all about overcoming challenges. Suffering from manic depression, she saw her life turn upside down from the effects of mental illness. "I was diagnosed at age 51 or 52, relatively late in life compared to other people," she said. "For 12 years, I suffered with mental illness. But I can look back now and see symptoms 10 years before I was actually diagnosed. I suffered 15 different manic episodes. I had 13 or 14 hospitalizations. I went on costly spending sprees. I was argumentative, paranoid and disruptive—all were symptoms of manic depression.

"For a total of six to eight months, intermittently, I lived on the streets," Holstein recounted. "Not because I didn't have assets, but because of other issues related to my mental illness. Sometimes it was because I was separated from my assets; other times, fear would drive me out of my home. I traveled to eight different states. I slept in homeless shelters, battered women's shelters, open fields, cardboard boxes, even the floor of a soup kitchen. I traveled on foot or sometimes in my car. Most of the time, I didn't realize these things were going on because I was delusional.

"During my manic episodes, which varied but usually lasted six weeks minimum, my friends would try to help me," she continued. "They were very concerned. They tried to get me committed, but there were limitations on what they could do. I lost many of my friends and colleagues because of my illness."

Four years ago, Holstein, under the care of doctors and using alternative therapy approaches, finally reached a stabilization point. "Some years earlier, I got mad at my doctors, who were giving me a bleak prognosis," said Holstein. "I was determined I was going to be well. So I turned over every rock and explored treatment options. I looked into self-help, alternative therapies. I had no real design for it; I just pursued everything to get well.

"I realized that getting well was more than just a medication approach. It involves all levels: physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual. You also have to exercise, get enough sleep, eat healthy and stress less—things everyone should do."

Today, Holstein works at the VA River Valley Integrated Health Center, part of the community-based outpatient clinic associated with the Tomah (Wis.) VA Medical Center. As a peer support specialist, Holstein works as the link between the community and the veterans being served at the clinic. Part of her job is to identify community resources, such as a local food bank or family and children's services, and help veterans get to those resources. She also works

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one-on-one with veterans on recovery and other issues.

Serving veterans has made all the difference in her life. "I've had a second chance," Holstein said. "I've had to rebuild my life, one step at a time, over the last four years. Now I have meaning in my life and I'm living a life of service again."

Holstein not only represents the clinic, she also speaks out on various veterans' issues. She has served on several steering committees, including the Veterans Treatment Court initiative and the newly established Mental Health Crisis and Detox Center. The center is a 24/7 facility, offering short-term treatment for those suffering from alcoholism or drug abuse, or those recently released from a mental hospital psychology ward.

Last year, Holstein facilitated the

establishment of a Veterans Council, one of the first created by a peer support specialist. With her as liaison, the nine veterans on the council help improve the services of the River Valley center and brainstorm possible projects to make the clinic a more welcoming place.

Holstein, who holds bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees, also co-facilitates a weekly discussion group called Journey of Recovery. During the hour-long meeting, she, co-facilitator Bob Olson, R.N., and veterans talk about their recovery from mental illness. Focusing on being a "whole" person, physically, mentally and spiritually, the participants discuss meditation techniques and other methods that have helped them enjoy life again.

Looking back on her life, Holstein wouldn't change much. "Now I have an expanded sense of purpose," she said. "I've taken a profound spiritual path, filled with humility, compassion, empathy and meaning. I've exposed myself to the world. My strengths have helped me overcome the stigma and be more open. I have a message that can help shift viewpoints for people with a mental illness. I feel it hasn't all been in vain."

On May 12, Holstein received the 2010 Shooting Star award from the Mental Health Coalition of the Greater La Crosse area. Getting the award, which is given to those with a mental illness who have made contributions to the mental health field, was a proud but humbling experience for Holstein.

"I want people to know we are not 'damaged goods,'" she said. "Everyone has hardships, but ultimately, you have to reframe those experiences. Spiritual paths come from hardship and suffering. I see things in a new light now. It took courage for me to speak about my illness. But if it brings hope and inspiration to others, it was worth it." **VA**

By Amanda Hester