

“We’re helping our veterans heal... one guitar at a time!”



“I’m so grateful to have an outlet to heal,” says veteran Angela (left), with her Guitars for Vets instructor, Taylor (right)

When Vietnam veteran Dan Van Buskirk decided to take guitar lessons, he was shocked to find his PTSD symptoms improving. So he paired up with his music instructor, Patrick Nettesheim, to bring it to other vets...and changed thousands of lives with the magic of music!

Dan Van Buskirk looked up at his guitar instructor, Patrick Nettesheim, with his eyes full of surprise. “I feel so calm,” the Vietnam War-era Marine marveled. It was a sensation that had sadly long eluded the Milwaukee, Wisconsin, resident after decades of suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). But after just one guitar lesson, he was noticing a marked drop in his anxiety.

“It’s amazing!” he exclaimed, to Patrick’s elation. *He’s discovering music is the medicine for his soul*, Patrick thought, when suddenly, Dan met his eye.

“We have to tell other veterans about this,” Dan exclaimed. “And I know exactly where to start.”

Chords of change

Dan suggested that the duo pay a visit to the nearby Clement J. Zablocki VA Medical Center to play for veterans there...but the two had no way of knowing how it would change their own lives forever.

As Patrick and Dan played, they saw the light return to the listeners’ eyes—some even inquired as to how they could take lessons themselves. Their impact was so transformative that Dan and Patrick were invited back, and soon after, they started a nonprofit, Guitars for Vets (Guitars4Vets.org), to provide veterans with physical injuries, PTSD and stress with a therapeutic alternative or 10 weeks of guitar instruction, free of charge.

That sounds like it could be just the thing for me, Angela Tunali, a Gulf War veteran struggling with PTSD and a painful divorce, thought when she came across Guitars for Vets online in 2017. For months, she had been staring at her guitar beckoning from the corner of her living room, but had no motivation to pick it up.

After getting approved for lessons at the local chapter in Nebraska, Angela felt a burgeoning hope,



Angela (right) practiced the guitar as a healing tool for 10 weeks with her instructor...

and went on to become a performer and guitar player for life

Stars like Willie Nelson support the program

which grew when she met her instructor, Taylor Ullom, a U.S. Air Force veteran who had played guitar for over 30 years and was the Director of Development at Guitars for Vets, a position that was a catalyst for her own healing. Besides her own struggles after serving, Taylor’s father, also a veteran, had died by suicide after the Vietnam War when she was just 3.

Maybe this will be the thing that helps me finally heal too, Angela hoped.

Transforming lives with a tune

As Angela continued her weekly lessons, she felt her whole mood and outlook brighten, so much so that after her graduation—wherein she received a donated guitar and accessory kit, Guitars For Vets’ gift to each graduate—she kept playing and attending monthly jam sessions, even performing with Taylor’s band, Heartland Homefront.

“I have a good support system, meeting once a month with others who understand,” Angela smiles. “I’m grateful to have an outlet now instead of focusing so much on my challenges.”

“The music we share is therapeutic and has the ability to change so many lives!”

Taylor has graduated 106 veterans through her local chapter, leads a team of 12 instructors and raises visibility and funds for the organization through her band. For her, that’s what the program is all about—the music and the love.

“It provides an environment filled with support,” Taylor shares. “It healed some very deep wounds in my life and blessed me with connections and friendships I never imagined. It’s taught me that everybody can do something, no matter how big or small, to help others. There is always hope and help available.”

To date, Guitars for Vets has helped thousands of veterans heal with more than

50,000 lessons and over 5,000 distributed acoustic guitars and accessory kits. The program, which is run by volunteers in conjunction with the Department of Veterans Affairs and community medical centers across the country, is thriving, and Dan and Patrick have no plans to stop spreading the power of music to those who need it most.

“Our mission is simple: the healing power of music in the hands of heroes,” Dan and Patrick share. “When a veteran picks up a guitar and strums, they feel it resonate into the center of their being and it helps release those emotions and traumas,” Patrick explains. “That’s what drives Dan and me and our lifeblood of more than 500 volunteers forward—the music that we share is therapeutic and has the power to change so many lives!” —*Monica Romano*



Guitar instructor Patrick Nettesheim (left) and veteran Dan Van Buskirk (right) started the program in 2007

3 surprising healing powers of music!

Boosts brainpower!

Learning to play an instrument keeps your mind sharp as you age, so says a study published by the American Psychological Association. Lead researcher of the study Brenda Hanna-Pladdy says, “Musical activity serves as a challenging cognitive exercise and makes your brain fitter.”

Reins in worries!

“Stopping to listen to a complex, powerful piece of music can evoke awe and give you a break from worrying,” says psychologist Michelle Shiota, Ph.D. How? That feeling of awe enhances creative thinking and helps shut down the part of our brain responsible for what-ifs, spurring out-of-the-box problem-solving.

Kick-starts heart health!

Research shows that blood flows more easily when music is played and decreases levels of the stress hormone *cortisol*, all while increasing *serotonin* levels. This triggers the release of biochemical stress reducers in the brain—reducing heart rate and lowering blood pressure!

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