

New Essay from Claudia Hinz: The War at Home

Michael Florez felt called to the Marines. “No greater love than dying for your brother,” the 42-year-old Oregon resident says. In 2004, Florez was deployed to Ar Ramadi, Iraq, with the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines. He was the point man, the first guy in to clear buildings of Al Qaeda, Taliban and foreign jihadists. These missions scared the hell out of him because he worried about who would be shot; he wanted that bullet if it meant saving his brothers. He’d been warned that the first deaths in combat would be Marines he didn’t know well, but that each successive death would hit closer. “It was always up close and personal for me,” Florez says. At the end of his first deployment, he came home and locked himself in his house. Every day he stared at the walls, his brain replaying the scenes of fellow Marines dying. His wife would come home to find him curled up on the couch crying.

Fourteen years and two more deployments later, Florez says every day feels like Groundhog Day. Small things, like hearing his children cry, can trigger a flashback, putting him right back in Iraq, lifting wounded Marines into the Humvee. Today, Florez still looks every inch an active duty Marine, clean-cut and shaven. In the past month he’s lost nearly twenty-five pounds. Eating makes him sick. There’s blood in his urine, and he’s worried about a recurrence of bladder cancer (he’s been in remission for more than a year). But it’s the depression that paralyzes him. There are weeks when he doesn’t leave the house, plagued by thoughts of what he might have done to save a fellow Marine and wracked with a physical pain so intense he’s thought about ending his life.



Veteran Volunteer Kyle Storbokken and COVR Greenhouse Manager Orion Carriger

“You come home,” Florez says, “and you’re fighting a whole other war with PTSD.” He lost fifteen comrades in combat, half of them right in front of him. Since returning from Iraq, eight of his buddies have committed suicide, one in the past month. The numbness Florez experiences is its own kind of hurt: “I love my kids, but the numbness keeps you from the love you should be able to feel, but you can’t because the pain’s too bad.” When Florez physically lashed out a family member, his wife turned to the Central Oregon Veterans Ranch.

Central Oregon Veterans Ranch (COVR), a nineteen-acre working ranch north of the city of Bend, opened in 2015. The Ranch is home to chickens, llamas, a productive greenhouse, and the Honor Quarters, a fully accredited Adult Foster Home that provides specialized end-of-life care to veterans. It is estimated that there are around 20,000 veterans in the tri-county area of Central Oregon—as of 2018, the Ranch has served nearly one hundred of them. Many veterans find their way to COVR through family members, including Mike Florez’s, who are desperate for help.

The Ranch is Executive Director Alison Perry’s life’s work. In 2007, Perry, a licensed professional counselor, was working at VA clinics in Bend and Portland and beginning to despair. She saw combat veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan being shuffled through a system that pushed pills and sent them home to families who felt helpless. Many of these veterans were abusing drugs and alcohol; they talked about suicide. In the meantime, Perry’s own brother, a pilot in the Army, was in Iraq, and she worried about him every day. Caring for veterans was a personal and urgent mission, and she felt like she was failing them. She remembers saying offhandedly to a colleague in Portland, “I wish we had a sheep ranch out east where we could send these guys when they got home...where they could work the land, sleep under the stars, and be in a community of other vets.”

During this time, Perry was also counseling combat veterans of

Vietnam and Korea and noticing a common theme in their conversations about dying. Time and time again, older veterans spoke to her about their wish to die alone, away from family and friends. These men were afraid of losing autonomy and becoming a burden to their families. Perry's vision of a refuge and place of healing began to take shape. How could she provide a safe environment for veterans to commune and heal, and, ultimately, to die?



COVR Founder Alison Perry with Warm Springs Vietnam Veteran Larsen Kalama after a Sacred Fire Ritual at the Ranch

Perry, 46, is an energetic woman whose reverence respect and concern for veterans is palpable. When she refers to the veterans at the Ranch as "my guys," she touches her heart. In developing the unique model of COVR, Perry considered two of the biggest risk factors for suicide: the lack of a sense of belonging, and feeling like a burden. If the property was going to facilitate healing and nurture a sense of self-worth, it had to be more than just a gathering place for veterans; there had to be opportunities for meaningful work and purpose, and ways for veterans to develop a new sense of identity and self-worth. Since opening the Ranch, Perry has witnessed firsthand the "regenerative energy" of caring for animals and working the land.

The Honor Quarters look out to the snow-capped peaks of the Cascade Range. In the entry way, a sign reads, "Heroes Don't Wear Capes. They Wear Dog Tags." The Quarters feel like an inviting family home in the modern farmhouse style. A couch and chairs are drawn in close around the fireplace, which is covered in a distressed wood rendering of the American flag. The dining table is decorated with military challenge coins displaying the seals of different units in the Armed Forces. Each bedroom bears cozy, personal touches, like quilts donated by the local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, and a throw pillow with the word "Dream." The Ranch is still awaiting grants and additional funding before

it can house full-time residents, and as Perry leads me through the empty bedrooms, she expresses both grief and frustration that there are veterans who would benefit from being here right now.



COVR grows greens, micro greens, and other seasonal produce for sale in local markets

Ed Ford, a veteran of Desert Storm and Iraq, is a familiar face at the Ranch, and one of many veterans who are indispensable to COVR, according to Perry. Ford comes out at least twice a week to cut lettuce in the greenhouse or dig out irrigation ditches. He speaks with a strong Boston accent seldom heard in this small town in the high Oregon desert. At 53, he's still a burly guy. He wears a tee shirt from a local multi-sport racing event. A tattoo of the Grim Reaper shadows his left bicep. Like all veterans at the Ranch, he is exceedingly courteous. Ford served twenty years in the Marines—he retired in 2004 and then spent the next eight years working for a private contractor doing security detail in Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2011, he was the Director of Operations when the lead vehicle in a convoy returning to Kabul was destroyed by an IED. Five men were killed, among them Ford's close friend, Ness. "Looking at him there on the slab, confirming his remains, I knew it could be me next." Ford finished the job and got out.

These days, Ford tries to stay busy. He holds down two jobs but gets out to the Ranch every chance he gets. Working on the property provides "a good workout" and "burns out a day." He says it is a relief to be around "like minded individuals" who understand what he's gone through: "No one's gonna judge you." And he knows if he needs to talk, the veterans at the Ranch will be there.

Hanging out with the guys at the Ranch is one of the only things that brings Mike Florez some relief. The first time he went out to COVR, he was introduced to Vietnam vets and

immediately recognized the look in their eyes: “the thousand-yard stare...they’d been suffering in silence too. It never leaves you.” Florez says it struck him that the older veterans had been struggling for more than 40 years, but they were still there, getting out of the house, and coming to work on the Ranch.

“Maybe they can show me something that helps,” Florez says, smiling for the first time. “And maybe I can help the younger fighters getting out. They have no idea what they’re coming home to.”



Contact the Ranch at info@covranch.org or COVRanch.org