

**PTSD
contributes
to the high
suicide rate
for veterans,
who are
2X as likely
to kill themselves
as civilians.**

40-year-old father who froze to death in the Iowa woods in February 2015 after a VA hospital ignored his plea for help, according to a CNN report. Or the Army veteran who walked 1,500 miles from Texas to Washington, D.C., to bring attention to PTSD claims he says were denied by the VA.

Even the intensive residential program in Miami, one of 39 across the country, can't promise a cure; the average veteran still qualifies for a diagnosis of PTSD after leaving the program, the 2014 congressional report found. Part of the problem, say those who work with PTSD sufferers, is that it's difficult to define success. Raul Diaz, team leader of the Palm Beach Vet Center in Greenacres, notes that it's not about a cure. "For those who already have the disorder, it can be controlled and understood, but it can't be beaten," Diaz says.

A decade ago, Diaz had a private practice in Lake Worth, specializing in critical incident stress management for police departments. That means Diaz would come in after a shooting and try to help an officer with the PTSD likely to result from it. After the start of the Iraq war, Diaz saw veterans coming back with deep emotional trauma. And it made him want to do more.

So at age 47, Diaz joined the Army, went through basic training and got his orders to ship out to Baghdad. Mortars started exploding his first morning there. "I [thought], 'What did I get myself into?' I was in a comfortable [air-conditioned] office in Lake Worth just months ago."

His job in Baghdad—and, later, when he did a second tour in Afghanistan—was to meet with soldiers who had just witnessed or survived death. The idea was for Diaz to try to prevent the trauma from turning into PTSD. It

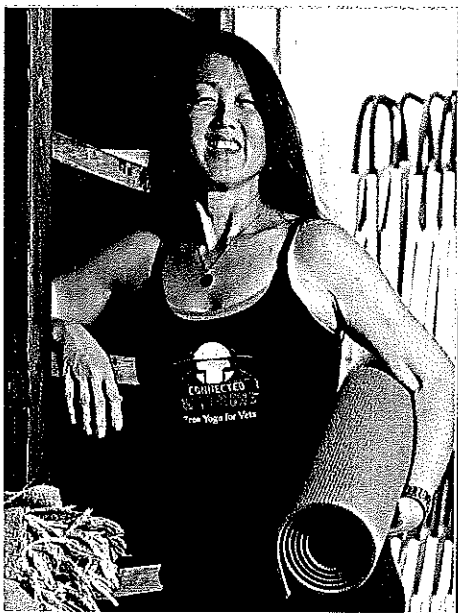


Angel Pabón

may sound sensitive, especially for military brass, to be thinking about the mental health of its soldiers. But it's also about battle readiness and about returning soldiers home without the need for costly counseling.

Diaz never saw combat, but he saw too much death. The gym where he had just been working out was wrecked by a mortar one afternoon. Why did he live and others die? Why couldn't he have done something? Even though he understood PTSD better than nearly anyone, he still saw signs of it developing in himself.

"When you're in a war zone, every single person around you, every single thing, can be a threat," Diaz says. "It's hard to shake that feeling when you get home."



Thanks to **Judy Weaver**, vets are turning to yoga as a way to deal with PTSD.

In early 2007, former Army ranger Beau MacVane, who had served five tours in the Middle East, walked into Judy Weaver's yoga class in Boca Raton. He was starting to suffer pain and cramping from ALS, and his doctor told him maybe yoga could help.

"I worked with him two and a half years, until he

died," Weaver recalls. "Yoga helped keep him and his family from depression. It did things for him he never expected, for his body and his mind."

Weaver realized she might have something that could help other veterans, especially those who suffer from PTSD. In 2010, she started offering free classes for veterans, and soon it took off. After her class filled up, Weaver urged other yoga instructors to join. Now, the nonprofit she co-founded—**Connected Warriors**—is in 14 states.

"My big vision is, wherever there's a veteran and

THE ENEMY WITHIN

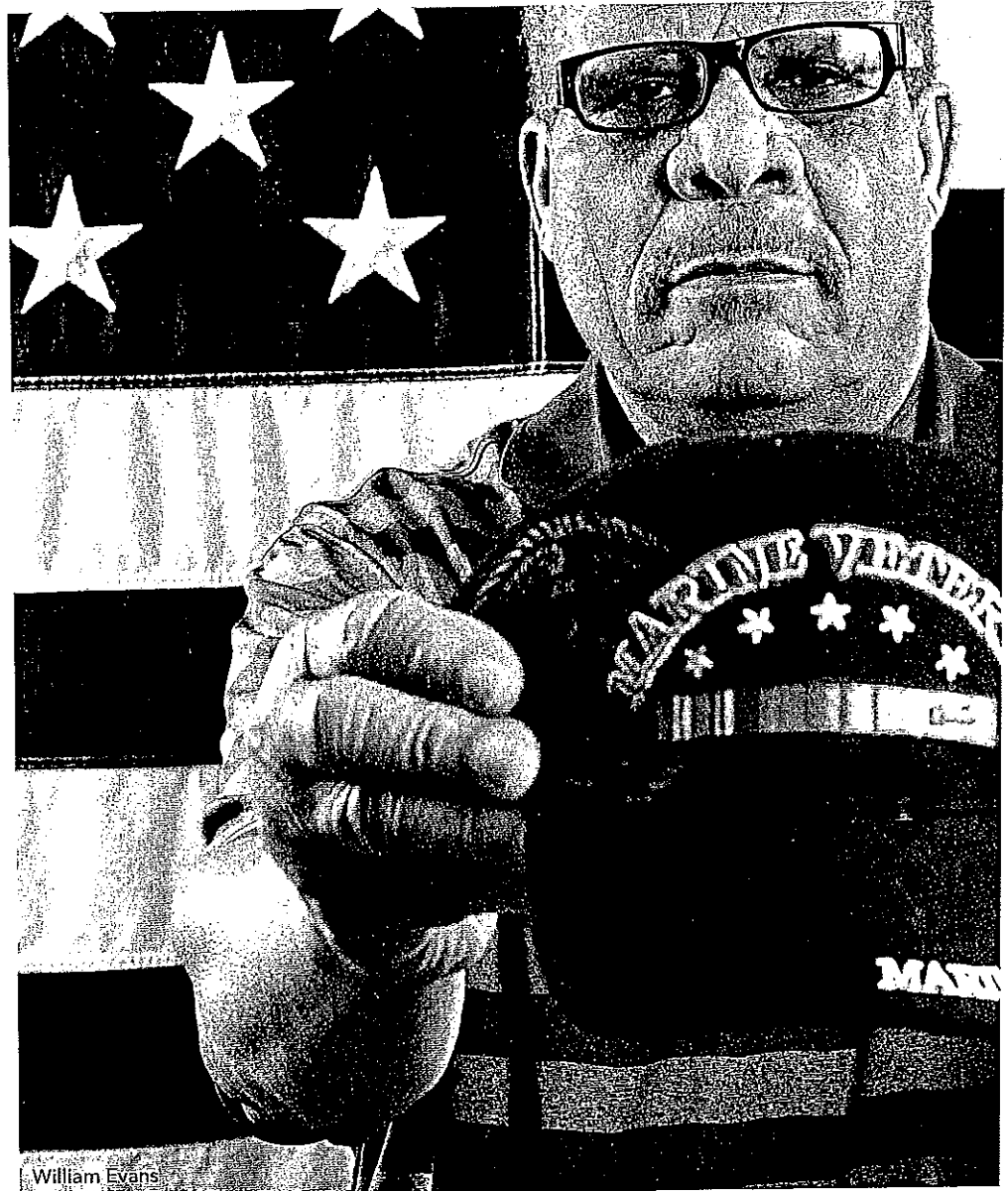
Angel Pabón knows that feeling all too well. Though he joined the Army in 1974, Pabón didn't see action until 29 years later; the Army sent him as part of the first wave during the invasion of Iraq. As platoon sergeant, he rode in the lead Humvee during supply missions. Fifteen months after the invasion, a roadside bomb detonated too early to be deadly, right under the Humvee's engine.

His team walked away, but the incident stayed with Pabón. He had times, upon returning home, when sounds would mess with him. Once, a construction noise sent him running for cover, thinking mortars were incoming. People told him to get help. "I am not crazy," he would say. "I don't need to see anybody."

Then there was the time on the highway, driving north on I-95 with his 15-year-old daughter. He looked in the mirror and saw a motorcycle; Pabón was sure it was one of the motorcycles that insurgents used to plant roadside bombs. He hit the gas, well past 90 mph. When the trooper pulled out, Pabón kept driving, convinced the bombers were coming for him. He finally stopped; the only thing that saved him from jail was his daughter explaining that her father had PTSD. After the incident, she wouldn't get back in the car with him.

That's when Pabón decided to get help.

Today, he works at the VA hospital in West Palm Beach as a peer support specialist, where he leads a group called Seeking Safety. Pabón helps others figure out what they need to avoid—loud noises and crowds, usually. They write an Operation Order, just like they'd do before a mission, on their objectives for treatment. Pabón then works with the vets to best determine how to repair their lives,



William Evans

where there's a yoga teacher, there's a Connected Warrior class," Weaver says.

Her program offers training for instructors who want to get involved, because yoga for veterans isn't the same as other classes. Most importantly, veterans with PTSD often don't react well to loud or unexpected noises, so the bell or gong some yoga instructors use during class has to go.

The veterans who attend Weaver's class run the gamut, from recent veterans of Afghanistan suffering

PTSD, to men from Vietnam still dealing with Agent Orange symptoms.

For most of them, it's their first time trying yoga. While some never return after that initial class, Weaver also has veterans who have been coming since the beginning.

On a recent Friday class at the Yoga South studio (3500 N.W. Boca Raton Blvd.), most of the men on the mats in Weaver's class were Vietnam veterans. They wore army-green headbands, shirts from their military

branch and graying ponytails.

One of the men was Matt MacVane, father of Weaver's first student, himself a twice-injured Vietnam veteran. Seeing how yoga helped his son, he started going too, and now he recruits any veteran he meets.

"You don't solve PTSD," Matt MacVane says, "but you figure out how to live with it. Yoga helps you live with it."

Call 954/278-3764 or visit connectedwarriors.org for more information.