

Nearly one in five soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan today shows signs of posttraumatic stress disorder. Three Goddard alumni are finding new ways to help them recover.



# WAR

## and healing

**TURNING ADVERSITY INTO STRENGTH** Michael Sulsona (GV/MA '89), above, lost both legs after stepping on a landmine in Vietnam. Now an award-winning playwright, he returned to Vietnam to research a play about fellow veteran Dwight Johnson, who won the Congressional Medal of Honor during the Vietnam War but later suffered from posttraumatic stress disorder. At right, Michael shares a meal with villagers during his trip back to Vietnam.

BY LAWRENCE GOODMAN (MFAW '08)



**W**hen Kim Rome was growing up, his father, who traveled for his work, dropped in to see him about once a month. “He would show up to say, ‘Hello, I’m alive, I’m here,’ and then threaten to kick the shit out of me,” Kim recalls. So it made perfect sense that when he began his studies in Goddard’s Health Arts and Sciences Program, he chose to study childhood trauma.

“I came from a pretty violent family environment,” says Kim, who worked as a carpenter in Boston for nearly two decades before starting Goddard’s master’s program. “I always felt a lack of safety.”

As he began researching his subject, he grew more and more interested in a mental illness known as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD sufferers endure years of emotional shock, stress and anxiety due to a traumatic event they experienced in their past.

Suddenly, he says, “I started to connect all the dots.” His father had always exhibited some of the classic signs of PTSD – rage, violent behavior and bouts of alcoholism. He was also a veteran of the Korean War, yet never seemed able to talk about his experiences on the battlefield there. It seemed quite clear to Kim that his father suffered from an undiagnosed case of PTSD. Something horrific had happened to him during his time in Korea, and he’d been dealing with the fallout ever since.

What began as a profound insight into his own personal past is becoming a career for Kim. Now that he’s graduated, he plans to work with veterans suffering with PTSD as an “expressive arts therapist,” which involves getting patients to express themselves through the arts as a way of healing their trauma.

Kim also, as part of the research he did for his master’s, interviewed his father. He still never spoke about the war, but their talks did give Kim insight into what his dad had been suffering through all these years. His father died shortly before Kim graduated, but he says the conversations he had with his father “really opened up my eyes and were a big key in my being able to forgive him.”

### Relooking at Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

While Kim was researching PTSD, he came across the work of Ed Tick (GGP ’75), a Goddard alumnus who is dedicating his life to working with veterans. Ed is a psychotherapist who earned his master’s at Goddard, began working with veterans in the late seventies, and within a few years concluded that the traditional approach to treating PTSD needed an overhaul. Psychotherapy could help veterans with the disorder, but, Ed says, “It wasn’t enough. I wanted to find more effective means of healing these soldiers.”

Ed began studying other cultures, looking to see how they reintegrated soldiers into their societies after a war ended. He studied the way Greek healers induced their patients to have mythological dreams in which a god or one of his helpers appeared and went about treating the dreamer’s illness. He learned from Native American elders how they put returning soldiers through purification rituals before letting them return to their families and community. In all the cases he looked into, he saw that the society had a ceremony or set of rituals in place to celebrate the soldiers’ accomplishments and then welcome

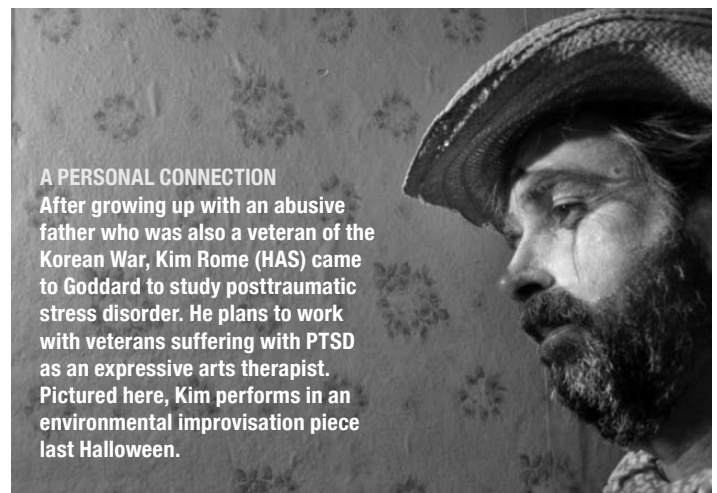
them back into the fold. The United States, on the other hand, didn’t have anything like this.

In the end, Ed concluded that PTSD wasn’t a mental disorder, but what he calls a “soul wound.” “It afflicts the individual on every level,” he says. “The way we perceive the world, locate ourselves in time and space, experience intimacy – it’s the total spiritual relationship between the individual and society.” A more holistic approach was needed to treat the soul, Ed decided. You had to work with the soldiers’ families and communities. You needed to take them back to the battlefield so they could commune with the wandering soul of the person they’d killed or make amends for their misdeeds. The goal is to restore the integrity of the person’s entire being. “I really woke up to the awareness – and my Goddard studies were the foundations for this – that war and extreme trauma are so complex that they penetrate to the soul,” Ed says. “It’s not just an individual pathology.”

Ed has been leading Vietnam veterans on annual trips back to Vietnam since 2000. On a recent trip, he arranged reconciliation meetings between the vets and members of the Viet Cong. He taught the vets about the Vietnamese belief that after death, the deceased’s soul wanders between worlds until the right person performs a series of spiritual rituals on their behalf. The vets then carried out the rituals on behalf of the Vietnamese they’d killed in combat. The group also performed a peace ceremony in a Buddhist temple.

“What we’re searching for is the possibility of profound healing,” says Ed. He points out that there is very little incidence of PTSD among the Vietnamese, which he says testifies to the effectiveness of “mythological ways of understanding trauma.”

Several years ago, Ed journeyed to Vietnam with a veteran haunted by memories of flying in a helicopter and gunning down



#### A PERSONAL CONNECTION

After growing up with an abusive father who was also a veteran of the Korean War, Kim Rome (HAS) came to Goddard to study posttraumatic stress disorder. He plans to work with veterans suffering with PTSD as an expressive arts therapist. Pictured here, Kim performs in an environmental improvisation piece last Halloween.



**MENDING THE SOUL** Ed Tick (GGP '75), at right, is co-director of Soldier's Heart, a nonprofit group that helps veterans who are returning from war. Every year, Ed leads a group of Vietnam veterans back to Southeast Asia and arranges reconciliation meetings between the vets and members of the Viet Cong. Above, former commanding officers from the United States and North Vietnam embrace.



scores of villagers' water buffalo grazing below. "Our vets presented water buffalo to an impoverished village," Ed says. It wasn't the same village as in the war, but symbolically, the vet "was giving back what he took."

Ed, who has a doctorate in communication and rhetoric from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, works as a therapist in upstate New York and co-directs Soldier's Heart, a nonprofit organization helping vets who've just returned from the war. His book, *War and the Soul*, is becoming a classic in the literature on trauma and war healing.

Ed says he is seeing a flood of Iraq war veterans in desperate need of help. "Morale is in the gutter," he says, "and many of the troops knew the country and the military were being lied to from the beginning. To go into war without a high sense of moral [purpose] is a recipe for PTSD."

To date around 300,000, or one in every five, soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, show signs of PTSD.

### A Pilgrimage for a Fellow Soldier

Michael Sulsona (GV/MA '89) is himself a veteran. In January 1971, he was serving as a marine in Vietnam on patrol near the city of Da Nang when he stepped on a landmine. Three helicopters came to rescue him and several other wounded soldiers only to become trapped in an ambush. Two of the helicopters "exploded right in front of me," says Michael. The third managed to lift him out, but he was barely alive. On board, a priest performed last rites.

But Michael survived and was moved to a hospital in Guam to recover. The doctors there told him they were going to need to amputate one of his legs. When he woke up after the surgery, both were gone. The doctors had discovered the infection had spread to the other limb. Two more times, priests performed last rites for Michael, once at Guam and later at a naval base in Philadelphia when his condition suddenly

worsened and doctors needed to perform multiple operations.

Michael did not experience PTSD. He says his perspective on his plight changed while he was in the hospital. "You looked around and you had victims with burns all over, guys missing arms and legs," Michael says. "You start to feel kind of lucky." It also helped that he was given prosthetic legs that made it hard for anyone to spot his disability (He now gets around by wheelchair.)

Several years ago, Michael, who lives in Brooklyn, N.Y., went to see a one-act play about a Vietnam vet named Dwight Johnson. Johnson grew up in a Detroit slum and became a hero after he almost single-handedly fought off a group of Vietnamese soldiers that attacked his patrol. In 1968 he returned to the United States and was awarded a Congressional Medal of Honor. But he began having psychological problems and was shot to death in 1971 while trying to hold up a convenience store near his home in Detroit.

The play Michael saw about Johnson upset him.

"It was written very well," says Michael, "but it took Johnson and put him in a room with a psychiatrist and had him shouting the whole time. I hated it." Michael instead saw Johnson as a "neighborhood good guy" who was labeled a murderer and generally spurned by society once he returned from the war. Michael also felt that Johnson, who was African-American, was exploited by the American government, which used him as a poster boy to recruit other African-Americans.

**"Our culture is extremely efficient in teaching people to be effective killing machines; however, we do nothing to bring them home effectively. We've taken people apart, but we haven't helped them get together again."** ED TICK (GGP '75)

Michael had never written about the Vietnam War despite being a prolific and award-winning playwright who has written more than 20 plays and 10 screenplays. The closest he came was in his screenplay for the 1996 film *Managua*, which he co-wrote with Michael Moriarty and Lou Gossett Jr. It's about an undercover U.S. agent sent to Nicaragua to find a friend who has become involved in the cocaine business and disappeared. (Michael also appeared in Oliver Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July*.)

But as Michael researched Johnson's life, he grew increasingly fascinated. "I just had this gut feeling that we had a lot in common," he says. Over time, he interviewed Johnson's friends and family and then traveled to Vietnam in search of the spot where Johnson had defended himself and his fellow soldiers so bravely. Michael's play, *The Good Heart*, pays tribute to Johnson's heroism and courage and follows the course of his life until its tragic end.

In an essay about his trip to Vietnam, Michael wrote about how learning about Johnson's life had transformed him:

"In the search for truth we find peace, and in peace we get a chance to learn about ourselves. Dwight has given me that opportunity, a gift. He's given me the chance to explore the truth and a purpose to share the experience. The truth about Dwight's life is: we must learn there are no winners in a war and that war is nothing more than bad business." 🍷