

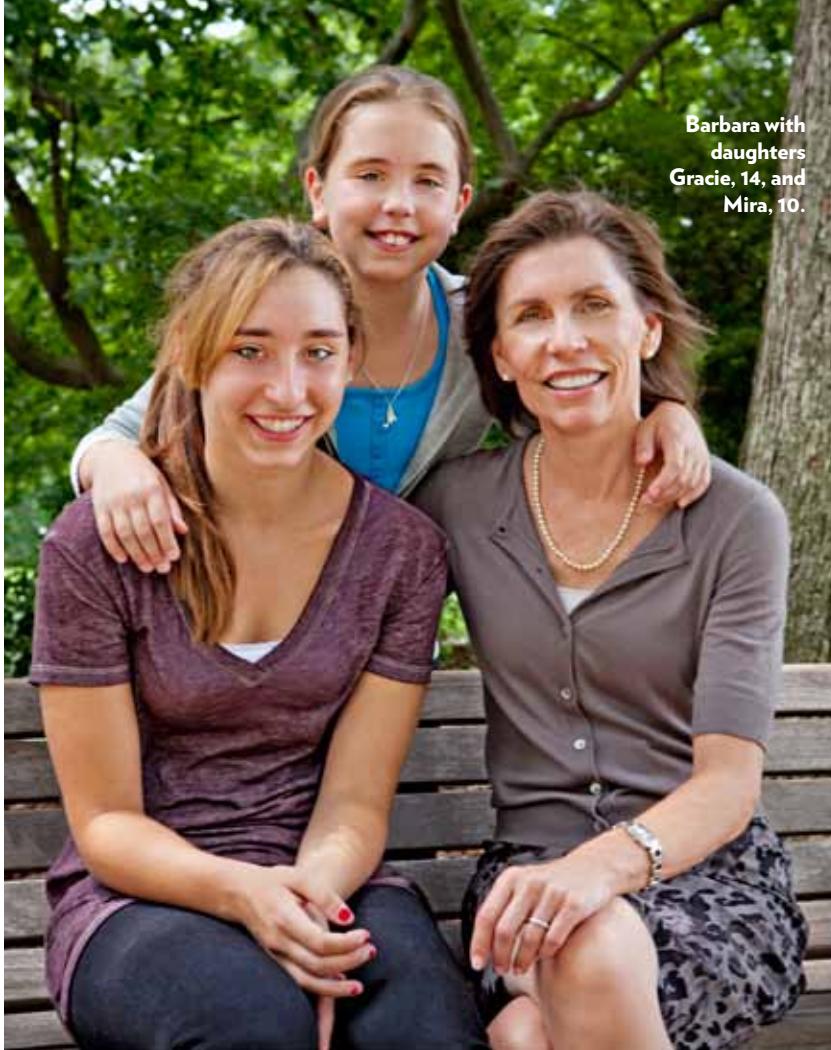


CALL OF DUTY

Barbara Van Dahlen's
Give an Hour
pairs returning
troops—and their
families—with free
mental health
services so that
they never have
to struggle alone.

★★★★★

BY CELIA SHATZMAN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MALEK NAZ FREIDOUNI



Barbara with daughters Gracie, 14, and Mira, 10.

It was another hot, sticky summer day in Bethesda, Maryland, five years ago, and Barbara Van Dahlen was driving her daughters, Gracie and Mira, then 9 and 5, to swim practice. Gracie looked out the car window and saw a man in army fatigues holding a sign that read: HOMELESS VIETNAM VET. PLEASE HELP. GOD BLESS. “My daughter asked, ‘Mommy, how can we let this happen to a veteran?’” says Barbara, now 51. “I knew right then I couldn’t let my daughters grow up wondering why we didn’t do anything to help. I thought, if someone needed to step up, it might as well be me.”

Barbara was raised in the shadow of war—her father was a World War II veteran. “My dad never talked about his experiences,” she says. “But he always stressed integrity, honor and service.” She also grew up during the Vietnam War, and was well aware of its psychic toll. “Many of the local boys in our little rural California town were drafted and a lot of them didn’t come back,” she says. “Those who did

were changed. I was still young when the war ended, but I could see even then that many of them were in terrible emotional pain.”

Being a psychologist, Barbara knew she had the expertise to help. “We have so much more knowledge about stress now,” she says. “We can do a better job with our men and women returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.” Her idea was to create a national network of

AT YOUR SERVICE

Often it happens that a friend or family member who needs therapy refuses to go. Rather than nag or pressure the person, you should reach out to a counselor.

As your loved one sees you developing a relationship with a counselor, he may take your concern more seriously and, since you've taken the first step, feel safer coming with you or going on his own. If you still meet resistance, your counselor should be able to help you find the right language. "What's most effective is to use loving, hopeful words to state that you see the pain they're in and that you want to help," Barbara Van Dahlen explains. "Say, 'I'm in this with you, and we'll figure it out together.' That's a powerful message for someone who is struggling."



mental health professionals who would provide free ongoing counseling services. "When someone goes to war and sees and experiences unimaginable horrors, it takes a toll on his mind," she says. "Not everyone is severely damaged, but we need to wrap our arms around the ones who are." In a matter of weeks Barbara had assembled a board and recruited volunteers to help create a website. Give an Hour (GAH) became an official nonprofit in January 2006, and had 1,200 volunteers providing counseling by May 2008.

"I'm especially concerned about the children and younger siblings of veterans, knowing how the effects of trauma can trickle down within families."

Its task is enormous. Since 2001 more than 1.9 million troops have been deployed to Afghanistan, Iraq and the Persian Gulf, and nearly 40% more than once. At least 20% of returning personnel experience severe depression or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and the suicide rate in the armed forces is the highest it's ever been. At the same time, only about half of suffering returnees seek treatment.

"The military is doing more than they ever have, but the system is complicated," Barbara says. "And while they're trying to get out the message that it's courageous rather than shameful to go for counseling, that perspective hasn't always filtered down the ranks." GAH fills in the gap, working as a separate organization but with the government's approval. "We're here to collaborate and coordinate," says Barbara.

The nonprofit provides treatment for anxiety, depression, substance abuse, anger management, PTSD, traumatic brain injuries, sexual-health and intimacy issues, family problems, and loss and grieving. Relatives are also eligible for assistance. "We define 'family' as any person who loves someone affected by the wars," Barbara says, which includes unmarried life partners and close friends. "I'm especially concerned about the children and younger siblings of the veterans, knowing how the effects of trauma can trickle down within families," she explains. "An angry or withdrawn member of the household affects everyone."

Now over 5,000 licensed mental health professionals representing all 50 states have registered to participate, each person donating an hour a week. Clients use a zip code finder on the website to locate providers in their area, choosing from particular specialties, such as marital counseling or PTSD. Or they can answer a brief questionnaire that will guide them to the right service. The therapists determine how often they see a client and for how many sessions, with no restrictions on



Barbara at the Governor's 27th Annual Volunteer Awards Ceremony in Maryland with Izzy Patoka, executive director of the Governor's Office of Community Initiatives (left), and Lt. Governor Anthony G. Brown.

FIND HELP

- ★ **GIVE AN HOUR**, giveanhour.org
- ★ **UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**, va.gov
- ★ **TRICARE**, tricare.mil
- ★ **AMERICAN PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION**, psych.org
- ★ **AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION**, apa.org
- ★ **NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS**, naswdc.org
- ★ **MENTAL HEALTH AMERICA**, nmha.org
- ★ **AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPY**, aamft.org
- ★ **STATE DEPARTMENTS OF MENTAL HEALTH; COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH CENTERS**

length of treatment. Volunteer therapists are required to commit to one year but most stay longer.

To expand services and get the word out, GAH now has a staff doing outreach, consulting with other nonprofits and providing educational programs. It has teamed up with Big Brothers Big Sisters to provide counselors for kids who have a parent cur-

rently deployed, and with AARP to recruit seniors to assist military families. This fall it also launched Community Blueprint, which helps local leaders develop ongoing support for military families.

Barbara relies on several corporate sponsors, gifts from individual donors, grants and small fundraisers to meet expenses like printing brochures for marketing. Her favorite fundraiser is Swim for the Troops, because her daughters, both competitive swimmers, have helped organize it for the past four years. Last July nearly 100 children—many of them Gracie's and Mira's friends—participated, raising almost \$1,500. "It's important that we all help military families," Gracie says. "Thanks to my mom, I'm aware of what our soldiers do and how much they give. I want to make sure that people are thankful for that." Barbara met her husband, Randy Phelps, Ph.D., through Give an Hour—he is a deputy executive director at the American Psychological Association. "Give an Hour is a family passion for us," says Barbara. "My girls are both very proud to help, whether it's stuffing envelopes or organizing the swim meet."

As GAH evolves, Barbara hopes they will continue consulting with the government to improve mental health services to veterans. Last year Barbara was invited to the White House to speak about the subject. She also gave a presentation to the House Committee on Veterans Affairs. "We want it to be automatic that our military men and women come home and get the right kind of support; it shouldn't be a stigmatized endeavor," she says. "By accepting help, they can really change the way our culture views the mental health consequences of war. If we all give a little bit, we can do a lot." ●

VOLUNTEERS WANTED » Licensed mental health professionals can sign up to become a provider at giveanhour.org. Give an Hour also needs support—including financial—in other areas, like outreach, education, marketing/public relations and administration; e-mail info@giveanhour.org to learn more.