

HEALTH

GUITAR • FROM B1

Volunteer group Six String Heroes teaches troubled veterans how to play the guitar and soothe their feelings

seeing people killed," he said. "In the first three days, we lost three guys, really good guys. It was like a movie, you can't believe it's real."

Stoner, a guitar player and financial professor for an online university, and Kevin Sullivan, a health care administrator who studied at Berklee College of Music in Boston, were teaching vets guitar at the VA with Guitars for Vets, a national program, when Milles met them. They, along with Mike Petty, a veteran of the war in Afghanistan, spun off and created Six String Heroes in February.

Milles had been playing guitar for years and serves as one of the volunteer instructors. His student is having trouble coping and worries that there's something wrong with him.

"I told him, no, that's normal, dude," Milles said. "We come here, and it feels like a safe haven. And to see (my student) leaving here, smiling and saying, 'Wow, I couldn't do this three weeks ago' . . . With PTSD, your confidence is destroyed. A class like this helps build it back up."

Veterans sign up for eight weekly sessions and earn a guitar if they attend six of them. So far, 18 have taken home guitars. Sullivan and Stoner started teaching guitar at Jefferson Barracks because they wanted to help returning troops.

"I wanted to do something to show my appreciation, and not everyone wants to learn about finance, so this was the only thing I could think of," Stoner said. He was sporting a mohawk haircut that he got as part of a challenge to raise \$500 for Six-String Heroes.

A WAITING LIST

Sullivan hopes the group will be able to teach 25 to 50 vets a year, but that depends on funding. They have a waiting list, and their fundraising efforts determine how many vets they can provide for. D'Addario, manufacturer of instrument strings, donated a year's worth of strings, straps and other accessories. The group recently changed its parameters for membership.

"We used to be more focused on beginner guitarists and giving away free guitars," Sullivan said. "But we realized that we wanted something ongoing. That way, they can continue attending, learning



Jeremy Hudson Sr. (left), a military veteran, and organizer Mike Petty jam as part of the Six String Heroes program at Jefferson Barracks.

the guitar and benefiting from the social aspects of the group."

Six String Heroes is recreational therapy, not music therapy. None of its volunteer instructors is a trained musical therapist.

But what the group does mirrors music therapy, something the Veteran's Administration has been using for a long time to help rehabilitate vets. Between 2005 and 2010, the organization more than doubled the number of music therapists at its clinics nationwide.

Helping war veterans return to an active leisure lifestyle is crucial because many of them have a hard time socializing when they come back, said Jean Ferguson, a recreational therapist at Jefferson Barracks. They often tend to isolate themselves and many use drugs and alcohol to cope with problems.

"You and I would talk about something in St. Louis, like a certain store," she said. "They're talking about things they saw over

there. A lot have lost old friends, because their old friends have gone on to different lifestyles. Many enjoy being with other vets so they're very comfortable here. This is their community."

Petty, a co-founder of the group, suffered a closed head traumatic brain injury when a rocket-propelled grenade blew up near a truck he was driving.

'FEELING LIKE ME AGAIN'

Therapy and counseling didn't do much for him, he said. Then he heard about Stoner and Sullivan, who were teaching at the center. The first song Petty learned was Pink Floyd's "Wish You Were Here." Now he's an instructor.

"I started playing and enjoying it, and it got me feeling like me again," said Petty, 33, of Park Hills. "...I wanted to help other guys feel good too."

Petty thinks his hand-eye coordination has also improved.

Meredith Melinder, a neuropsychologist with the polytrauma

team at the VA, said such activities can only help. She and experts who study the brain, point to mounting evidence that learning new skills helps develop parts of the brain that haven't been used.

"That's important when a brain has been injured," she said. "In terms of cognitive functioning, playing guitars requires motor coordination, memory, the ability to concentrate and pay attention, it also involves goal-setting, planning and follow-through."

Sullivan was teaching chords from Carlos Santana's "Evil Ways" to a veteran in a hallway outside the room where Stoner and Shumaker were playing.

Tony Rivertoni sat nearby picking at a string on his guitar.

Rivertoni, 25, of Columbia, Ill., was in Iraq for 15 months starting in 2006 with the Illinois National Guard. His duties included providing security for downed vehicles and supply convoys. The Iraqis fired on his truck on nearly a daily basis. Rivertoni came home

physically unscathed. Whether he was suffering from PTSD, no one knows.

He was drinking more than usual in the months after he returned, his father Flavio Rivertoni said. And he was drinking last year when he had a car accident that left him in a coma for six weeks and with a traumatic brain injury.

Sullivan turned his attention to Rivertoni, and instructed him to lay his guitar flat on his lap, strings facing down. The two practiced drumming with their fingers on the wooden backs.

"He wants to write some songs," his father said. "I say, 'first we have to learn to play then we write some songs.' He's serious about it."

Asked why he takes the guitar lessons, Tony Rivertoni's face lit up in a boyish grin.

"The whole thing kind of orientates around, well, I hate to say it, but I just want to have fun," he said. "And this is really fun."

Diabetes can be unpredictable.



HIGH 226
LOW 99



HIGH 110
LOW 75



HIGH 186
LOW 83

A clinical research study may help people with type 2 diabetes better manage blood glucose levels.

Those who have type 2 diabetes, and are currently taking a daily dose of metformin (or metformin and pioglitazone), are invited to find out if they may qualify for a clinical research study to determine the safety and effectiveness of an investigational medication to manage diabetes. Among other criteria, those who have previously taken insulin as a treatment option are not eligible. To find out if you may qualify, call the area physician below:

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