

SWORDS TO PLOWSHARES

War veterans turn to horticultural therapy to help heal wounds

BY MEGAN WETHERALL □ PHOTOGRAPHY BY MEGAN WETHERALL & JOANNA TULLY

There are currently 441,820 war veterans who call New Jersey their home. Some of them served their country as far back as World War II, others as recently as Iraq. One of them is Matthew Smith, a 26-year-old combat engineer who spent a year each in Iraq and Afghanistan. Another is 72-year-old George Madosky, who describes himself as a “disabled Marine from the Vietnam era.” These gentlemen have yet to meet, but when they do they will find they have a great deal in common. For one, upon returning to civilian life, they were both drawn to the therapeutic benefits inherent in growing plants as a means of healing themselves—and others.

It's a humid Saturday morning in July and I am navigating the deserted backstreets of New Brunswick, home of Rutgers University, where Matthew (he prefers to go by his first name after five years in the military of being identified as “Smith”) is working toward a bachelor's degree in agricultural science, with a certificate in horticultural therapy. As I enter a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood I notice that the generic fast food chains have dropped away, replaced by hole-in-the-wall Mexican eateries and grocers. I am looking for a plot of land on the fringes of Rutgers that has blossomed in recent years into a community garden and now hosts a weekly farmers' market. Matthew is one of two Rutgers students doing an internship here that involves supporting the resident gardeners, heading a community effort to restore an abandoned greenhouse, mentoring high school volunteers, and creating a business plan to maximize the yields of all this productivity so it might become a sustainable and perhaps even profitable enterprise for the neighborhood.

When I eventually track Matthew down in the greenhouse, which still has an overgrown Jack-and-the-Beanstalk feel to it, he strides forward to welcome me, his smile blazing and bright blue eyes warm beneath a well-loved cowboy hat. He reaches out a strong hand to shake mine and I can clearly read a tattoo on his right shoulder: “For our Fallen Brothers” with four names etched below. We first met a few days earlier, but seeing Matthew in this environment is to see him afresh, in his natural habitat. He shows me around, his enthusiasm contagious, pointing out lemongrass, yerba santa, epazote, basil, purslane and cilantro as well as several varieties of chilies and some aloe vera plants. In the Jardin de Esperanza (Garden of Hope), I admire dozens of raised beds shared by families. They are bursting with tomatillos, jalapeños, tomatoes, chard, kale, beans and an array of flowers on which butterflies and bees are competing to land.

While observing Matthew's happiness here, it is almost impossible to imagine him detonating explosives in combat zones in Southern Baghdad, storming houses in search of weapons, and spending weeks at a time in the deadly mountains of Afghanistan.

I remember what he told me about the reason he joined the Army right out of Milford High School: “I thought I could help people. I had such a bad upbringing. My father died when I was 12 so it was just my mom, my brothers and me. We were on welfare and I felt like I wanted to give back.”

During his deployment in Iraq, Matthew developed stomach problems so severe that he was flown to Germany to have his gall bladder removed—pointlessly, it turned out, as his pain and vomiting continued. Back at an Army base in Texas, mystified doctors suggested that Matthew's problems were psychosomatic, which a subsequent psychiatric evaluation discounted. Finally he was given a diagnosis of gastroparesis, a digestive condition in which the stomach muscles don't function properly. But it wasn't until Matthew's mother took him to a holistic doctor, shortly before his deployment to Afghanistan, that he was introduced to natural remedies such as aloe and began to feel some relief. When he returned from Afghanistan a year later he describes his overall health as “pretty bad.”

Along with the gastroparesis, Matthew had begun to experience post-traumatic stress disorder, chronic fatigue, and back pain caused by getting caught in explosions; he also weighed 230 pounds. “They don't feed you the best food,” he explains. He described his addiction to energy drinks, the junk eaten during night shifts, and the staple diet of MREs, or “meals ready to eat,” which are made to last for 10 years.

“When I got back from Afghanistan in February 2010, I had two months left in the Army and then I was out,” he says. “I was so happy but had no idea what I wanted to do with my life.” Matthew's search took him to Arizona, Michigan, Montana and Washington. He considered nursing, as his overriding desire was still to serve others, but knew that the Western medical model was not for him. He had been reading extensively about medicinal herbs. In addition to aloe, he had begun taking licorice root to support his adrenal glands. He was also noting that the more brown rice and fresh greens he ate the better he felt. He decided to spend the summer hiking the Appalachian Trail and to walk and think until he reached a decision about his future. During the six weeks it took him to walk from Shenandoah National Park in Virginia to New Jersey, he foraged wild asparagus, onions, dandelion roots and blackberries. “I was coming





Matthew Smith



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across farms in Maryland and it was so gorgeous and peaceful. Right about the time I got to the Pennsylvania border it came upon me: I want to grow food."

Studying at Rutgers has opened Matthew's eyes to the myriad ways of doing just that. He completed an internship on a rural farm last summer but is now drawn to urban farms and creating what he calls "food hubs." He plans to use his certificate in horticultural therapy to help troubled youth, adults in rehabilitation and veterans like himself. He has already practiced using horticultural therapy with severely autistic, nonverbal children at the Douglass Developmental Disability Center at Rutgers. "Some of them liked getting down and dirty and some didn't, but they all enjoyed being a part of it."

The community garden in New Brunswick is a work in progress for Matthew as he explores all avenues of growth. He relishes the cooking component as the families arrive en masse to tend their plots, with babies and grandparents in tow, and set up their barbecues. He has learned how to make salsa and grill cactus. Children whose parents work two jobs and who have nothing to do all weekend congregate here. They take turns frolicking with Matthew's rescue dog, Riley, they chomp their way through mounds of watermelon, and they work in the garden too.

According to the American Horticultural Therapy Association, the therapeutic benefits of garden environments have been documented since ancient times. Horticultural therapy codifies the practice, creating programs that integrate plant systems and culture techniques with human psychology and health. In HT, a qualified professional establishes goals and objectives for an individual or group and records the process and outcomes. To understand more about HT, I spoke to Laura DePrado, a therapist based in Branchburg and a powerful advocate in the field. Thanks in part to her efforts and determination the New Jersey Department of Agriculture recently passed the 2013 Horticultural Therapy Resolution, which "recognizes HT as a practical and viable treatment." This is the first state-level endorsement of its kind in the nation, which makes New Jersey, and DePrado, a pioneer in the burgeoning movement.

DePrado explains that there are three areas of application for HT: social, vocational and therapeutic. Just the simple, repetitious act of sowing seeds can lower anxiety and agitation; give purpose and meaning; nurture; and improve muscle memory, mental and muscular recall, and the ability to sequence and follow directions. "We are all connected to the seasonal rhythms, we naturally respond to them," DePrado says. "The process itself is what affords the connections on so many levels." ►



For George Madosky, who served in the Marine Corps from 1958 until 1963, it took a little longer to find his true

calling. He had theoretically retired when

he “tripped into horticulture” after acquiring some land in Monroe County, Penn., for the purpose of keeping horses. There was a drought that year and while weeding he discovered that there were two varieties of daylilies clinging on for dear life in their midst. “I cleaned it up, started cultivating and taking care of it and here we are.” He sold his horses and in 2000 opened a nursery selling 28 varieties of daylilies as well as hostas and ornamental grasses. “As soon as I put my hands in the soil, bought myself a tractor and was working with Mother Earth it was like I’d finally found a home.”

These days Madosky also devotes his time to a veterans memorial home in Cumberland County where he uses horticulture “as a form of connection” with elderly and infirm veterans. “I’m a PTSD candidate so I have a very difficult time being in a civilian group of people,” he says. “When these men came back from World War II, Korea or Vietnam they really didn’t have any mental health services to help them and there was a major shame issue around [war-related mental health issues]. Most of them got out and just did the best they could, put one foot in front of the other. The veterans here have reached a point where they have no place else to go.” Madosky works in a team of master gardeners who are not certified HTs but are trained to do community outreach. The veterans, most of whom are in wheelchairs, sit comfortably at raised beds in a courtyard. “The look on their faces when they see a seed go to a plant is so healing it’s unbelievable,” Madosky tells me. “Every day that we go there a major spiritual experience takes place.” The veterans grow herbs, tomatoes, squash, cucumbers and cantaloupe, and as the crops ripen they can come out in the evening and pick and eat whatever they like. “They’re getting nurturing from that, from being part of a full cycle,” Madosky says.

When I speak to Laura DePrado about the ways in which Matthew and George have organically discovered their source of healing, she comments that plants do not judge. Furthermore, they offer an opportunity to rediscover hope. “These two fine men validate and give a depth of meaning to the endless benefits of HT as a movement here in New Jersey,” she says. “This is a canvas in the making and they are contributing to the painting of this picture.”

Madosky’s dream now is to open up his nursery to returning veterans. “These young guys coming home don’t know what they want to do. A lot of them have PTSD and can’t get out of bed in the morning. We need to let them know that there is a safe place for them to come. I can teach them the business part, how to apply for grants, and how to farm without chemicals. This is the ground roots of man, the beginning of life. That seed is still down there in every one of us. I want to get the young veterans to step in and feel that energy and talk about that stuff once or twice a week. Before you know it you have a whole team of people on the same track helping each other and it’s all coming from a seed.” 🌱



To find a horticultural therapist in your area or to look into the certification process, contact the American Horticultural Therapy Association at ahta.org or the Mid-Atlantic Horticultural Therapy Network at mahtn.org.

For more information on horticultural therapy degree and certificate programs at Rutgers, go to aesop.rutgers.edu/~horttherapy.