

‘It’s Clear How Calming Making Music Really Is’

A Vietnam War veteran and VFW member in Virginia joined Guitars 4 Vets as an instructor to help teach music as a form of PTSD therapy

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George Gagnon sat having lunch when his calling walked through the door of VFW Post 6364 in Richmond, Virginia, in November 2021. It arrived in the form of Jim Carney, a representative with the Richmond chapter of Guitars 4 Vets, a national nonprofit dedicated to helping veterans treat PTSD and other wounds of war through music.

Gagnon, a Vietnam veteran who began playing the guitar in 1964, overheard Carney’s pitch on using Post 6364 as a venue to teach guitar lessons. Intrigued about the prospects of such a union, he approached the Guitars 4 Vets representative about joining the effort.

“We met weeks later, and he gave me paperwork and signed me up as an instructor,” said Gagnon, who served with the Army’s 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Div., in Vietnam between August 1970 and June 1971. “I did all the training required and was soon teaching fellow veterans at my Post.”

On Dec. 1, 2021, Gagnon taught his first guitar lesson to a Post 6364 member, Army veteran Soloman Blevins. The experience confirmed his own therapist’s view on music carrying the power to ease suffering and treat several wounds of war often not visible to many.

For Gagnon, who strummed his guitar alongside his student, the notes produced by this instrument of wonderment moved gently across the room to calm them both.

“For 45 years, I did not know I was suffering from PTSD, and it was my therapist who eventually told me I was giving myself therapy all these years by playing the guitar daily,” Gagnon said. “So it was very gratifying to see other veterans with that sparkle in their eyes as they made progress in learning how to play the guitar because it’s clear how calming making music really is.”

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‘BEING A GOOD LISTENER IS VERY IMPORTANT’

Since beginning his volunteer teaching role in 2021, Gagnon has helped three veterans graduate from the Guitar 4 Vets program, which includes a 10-week course that ends with a certificate of completion, a Yamaha guitar and several books on music theory.

The program also offers advanced lessons following the 10-week course and graduation, a way to keep those transformed by the progress in tune with the power of creating music.

In his short time as a teacher for Guitars 4 Vets, Gagnon’s influence has brought many other students to sign up and learn to play the guitar. The lessons, added Gagnon, resemble a therapy session split between learning the music and speaking candidly with one another, a mutual connection shared through combat.

“As an instructor, there are times when you just listen and do very little with the guitars,” Gagnon said. “You don’t have to be a good therapist, but being a good listener is very important. These guys sometimes just want to share their story with someone who can be empathetic and understand them. As a veteran who suffered from PTSD myself, I am able to provide that.”

Through the Guitar 4 Vets chapter in Richmond, Gagnon says more than 143 veteran students have graduated since its inception in 2011. The chapter operates on donations, issuing a \$200 guitar to veterans free of charge upon graduation, as well as books on music and other useful tools to enhance their experience.

Since coming onboard and having Post 6364 Commander Mike Purcell give his blessings for the Richmond chapter to use the Post as a venue, Gagnon also has paved the way for all students of the program to receive a proper graduation ceremony during the Post’s weekly meetings.

“We as a Post let the Richmond chapter use the venue free of charge, which allows my fellow VFW members that have been treated for PTSD to witness the lessons, and some have signed up for lessons themselves as a result,” Gagnon said. “We also have made the Post available to other instructors of the program, as well as using it for our regional chapter meetings.”

‘MANY VETERAN LIVES WILL BE ENRICHED’

The Richmond chapter is one of more than 100 Guitar 4 Vets chapters established nationwide since its creation in 2007, prompting VFW to ink a partnership with the nonprofit in March 2022.

Like Gagnon and legions of veterans using guitars to treat their PTSD and other wounds of war today, Guitar 4 Vets co-founder Dan Van Buskirk created the nonprofit after discovering the power guitar lessons had on his own mental health.

A Vietnam War veteran himself, Van Buskirk joined guitar instructor Patrick Nettesheim in sharing what they had learned at the Clement J. Zablocki VA Medical Center in Milwaukee, a lesson that has since become the origins of Guitars 4 Vets.

“The VFW is providing Guitars 4 Vets with the most significant expansion opportunity since the founding of our mission in 2007,” Nettesheim said. “As a result, many veteran lives will be enriched and possibly even saved. We share the belief with the VFW that through the healing power of music, the effects of PTSD on the mind, body and spirit can be lessened.”

Since 2007, Guitars 4 Vets has provided more than 50,000 lessons and distributed more than 5,000 guitars to veterans. With more than 100 chapters in 40 states and counting, the VFW’s extensive network of about 6,000 Posts around the world is poised to expand the program’s reach.

VFW members interested in volunteering opportunities or hosting free guitar lessons at their Post are encouraged to contact Guitars 4 Vets National Program Director Bailey King at bailey@guitarsforvets.org.

This article is featured in the 2023 February issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Ismael Rodriguez Jr.](#), senior writer for VFW magazine.