

The best is yet to come!

by Deacon Gary Stone OAM

On my 60th birthday Archbishop Mark Coleridge sent me a birthday greeting. He said, “the best is yet to come”. A few months prior to that, he had visited me in Greenslopes Hospital where I was recovering from cancer and peritonitis. Indeed, the doctors told me it was a miracle that I had survived. My future was uncertain. Mark offered me hope.

As I look back over the last 14 years, I could not have possibly imagined how prophetic Mark’s comments were to be. My battles with cancer, post-traumatic stress, moral injury, burnout and compassion fatigue were to become the seed bed for growing a new life of purpose that was life-giving for me and life-giving for others.

I came home from hospital 16 kg lighter but with some insights into holistic health and the need for us to do something revolutionary in preventing Veterans suicide. The classic “Medical” model of “medicate isolate and compensate” wasn’t working for me, or for many of the other veterans I was engaged with. Together with a small team, we put together a charity and start doing something. We developed the Veterans Care Association and my veteran son Michael proposed we start taking Veterans over to Timor to give them an inspirational experience that could lead to transformation. We started with one experience, and have just completed our 40th Timor awakening program, in the company of 30 other Veterans and family members. It was a truly transformational program. My cup overflows. I feel on top of the world.

On the final day of the program when participants are invited to share their awakening, one of the former special forces soldiers with almost 30 years of uniformed service made the following statement.

“This program was without doubt the best experience of my life. It exceeded my expectations and I was finally able



to let go and get closure with trauma I experienced over 20 years ago, and which I had felt ashamed of and led to continual suicidal ideation and a suicide attempt. I am eternally grateful for this amazing opportunity”.

Others commented about the insights and awakenings that they had experienced in coming together in a common purpose; to get themselves healthy so that they can help others get healthy; finding friendship gratitude, welcoming and genuine acceptance wonderful relationships together; and ongoing gratitude by the bucketload.

The program comprises 11 days of focus on a whole range of matters that can nurture the body, the mind, the soul, relationships, and help people develop a future life purpose. Key topics include: Tribe, identity, values, compassion fatigue, forgiveness, Big talk, “above the line or below the line”, forgiveness, gratitude and purpose. Inputs and discussions are combined with daily engagements with local charities to visiting villages, assisting in development of schools and the conduct of medical clinics- so our Veterans can “give back”, spreading happiness and care.

The programs have directly assisted well over 1000





Veterans families. In addition, on a day-to-day basis, Veterans care mentors and well-being advocates are assisting 10 times that number with occasional support, inputs and advice.

Despite a Royal Commission into Veterans suicide, government funding to support initiatives like this has not been forthcoming. Many Veterans and their families continue to struggle without the insight or awakenings that Veterans themselves have discovered and have now put into practice. Our funding for the future is uncertain, but we trust in God.

We in the Veterans Care Association will “soldier on” supported by people of Goodwill who desire to follow the appeal of Jesus that we love our Neighbours. Our inspiring symbol is that of a “Good Samaritan” caring for those in need irrespective of who they are. Our inspiring scripture verse is the words of Jesus in Luke chapter 4, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon us for he is anointed us, to bring good news to the afflicted, to proclaim Liberty to captives, new sight to the blind, and set the downtrodden free, proclaiming the Lord ‘s favour.”

I’ll conclude with the gratitude of one of the participants,

“To the mentors and everyone at Veterans Care, and those that have financially supported us, thank you for creating something that goes well beyond being a program. I have been among great people- truly great people. You’ve given us the space, the people, and the opportunity to stop, think, listen and work out what we want the next part of our lives to be looking like.”

If you would like to be part of contributing to this mission of mercy, please contact us on

support@Veteranscare.com.au
and scope out our website
www.veteranscare.com.au

“The Best is yet to come”, for all of us, when we engage in the mission of God.

“Awakenings”

that the experience revealed included:

- I recognised that I was behaving mostly below the line. I intend to use the tools and techniques to get above the line and stay there.
- There were moments in these last 10 days that I will remember for the rest of my life Some have been confronting, some humbling and other simply joyful, but it’s the people, the conversations the honesty the laughter, and the shared experiences that I’ll carry with me the most.
- I realise that our uniformed service doesn’t have to be the end of our contribution. Our experiences and even the difficult parts can have value. We have something to offer to each other to our families, to our communities, and to the people of Timor.
- I feel unburdened by the shame and torment I’ve carried for over 20 years. I feel physically mentally emotionally and spiritually renewed and optimistic for the future.
- I feel like I’ve been given a new starting point and for that I’ll be ever grateful. Thank you for the awakening. I’ve come to realise that connection and forgiveness will make us stronger and that I have much to be grateful for.

