



Volunteers  
of America®

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA  
& NORTHERN NEVADA

*Some people can't imagine doing what we do.  
We can't imagine not doing it.*

## Insider's update on our national Moral Injury Initiative

Dear Table Captains,

Once again, thanks for being part of our winning team for Volunteers of America's 18<sup>th</sup> annual Shelter From The Storm Fundraising breakfast which will be held on May 2, 2019 at the DoubleTree Hotel from 8 to 9am.

I'm pleased to give you an insider's update on a new initiative that will be featured during the breakfast program. In addition to a personal testimonial by one VOA Sacramento program client, we'll present a short video to introduce our organization and shine the spotlight on one program or initiative. This year, it will be our national Moral Injury Initiative.

Please take a few moments to look over the following pages; I want you to know about our work that's starting on moral injury healing, and the story of one person whose life has been changed. So, when May 2 is finally here and you're at your table with your guests, you'll be well briefed and ready to answer your guests' questions on this topic.

If this initiative speaks to you personally or you have an idea or suggestion, tune me in now or whenever it occurs to you.

I'd like to see this initiative flourish built on a strong foundation with our local faith communities. To begin, it could be as simple as receiving our clients' prayer requests, and hearing regularly of their prayers answered. That's a start.

Warmly,

Melissa J. Chin

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## Answers to frequently asked questions

**Q: What is Moral Injury? I've never heard about it before.**

**A:** Moral injury is a relatively recent term used to describe a crisis that soldiers have faced for centuries, the internal suffering that results from doing something against your moral code. In essence, it is a wound to the conscience.

**Q: Who's affected by moral injury?**

**A:** Anyone who works with marginalized, at-risk populations has probably seen that empty stare that can be moral injury. People in poverty. People struggling with addiction. People whose daily lives and their choices erode their feeling of being a good and decent person, worthy of respect. People who carry unprocessed grief and guilt in ordinary life. People with stressful life-and-death type situational jobs such as police officers, doctors and nurses. Because of things we do, witness, are ordered to do, or fail to do in high stakes situations. We can lose our moral foundations and our sense of being a good person. This can significantly hold individuals back from achieving their full potential in life.

**Q: How does this work align with Volunteers of America's mission and values?**

**A:** Founded in 1896, we're more than a nonprofit organization. Volunteers of America is a church without walls. "Go wherever we are needed and do whatever comes to hand" was the pledge made by Ballington and Maud Booth when they founded Volunteers of America 122 years ago. Today, we have a saying. "Love starts here!" Our services are designed to instill hope, increase self-worth and facilitate independence. We're unique because we do our best work by integrating our deep compassion with highly effective programs and services. We do this through a ministry of service led by more than 500 professionals working across Northern California & Northern Nevada to touch the lives of thousands of people each year.

We seek to serve the needs of the whole person (mind, body and spirit) by bringing together the human service agency and the church. We provide assistance to people of all faiths and never require those we serve or those we employ to participate in worship services or to acknowledge specific beliefs. Yet, from our very beginning, our work has been and continues to be motivated by God's love. We have answered the call to be a ministry of service that sets Volunteers of America apart.

## Resources

Volunteers of America offers a complete summary of resources including videos, movies, books and journal articles as well as several websites that cover the topic.

➡ Visit [www.voa.org/moral-injury-center/moral-injury-resources](http://www.voa.org/moral-injury-center/moral-injury-resources)

## Striving for Balance: A Female Veteran's Battle with PTSD and Past Childhood Abuse

by Shela Webb



*Shela is a case manager with Volunteers of America Northern California and Northern Nevada.*

My injuries date back to when I was very young. They began at age three and continued until I was 12, all inflicted by my father. I'm just beginning to deal with the repercussions because I thought I'd gotten past everything that happened. No therapist had ever put the pieces together until now. My history of injury is probably the reason for my many failed relationships, my inability to form friendships, my lack of trust in some cases and trusting too much in others. It's also the reason I keep everyone at a distance.

My parents divorced when I was six, and I watched my mother drink a lot and fall in-and-out of love just as often. I saw my father in the summers and lived with him in Alaska during my 5th grade year. He would molest me almost daily after becoming too drunk to realize what he was doing. The father of my best friend at the time would also attempt to molest me but stopped at his daughter's request; my friend and I were both 11.

I moved around often as a kid and, subsequently, many more times while I served 22 years in the military—43 addresses in 46 years of living. I thought the military would be my sanctuary, a place where I could be myself and do the things I longed to do: mechanics, serve my country, see the world. But I was injured again, and on more than one occasion.

*"My injuries date back to when I was very young...My entire life has been spent living within extremes: too much bad and too little good. I am slowly starting to find the middle where there is calm."*

The biggest injury came very early in my career. The last question on my military contract asked if I was homosexual or had ever engaged in homosexual activities. I marked NO. It was a lie that would haunt me my entire career. The truth was that I was a lesbian and had been as far back as my memory allowed.

That lie cost me my identity for the better part of my adult life. It forced me to be silent and to deny my true self and those I loved. I was never able to share my life with a partner, to have them greet me at the pier when my ship pulled in, or to invite them to work functions. I feared daily that I would be found out and would lose my career. It was painful.

The Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT) movement finally caught up with me during my initial enlistment. I was summoned to courts-martial for allegedly sexually harassing a woman who was older and who held a higher rank than me. My reenlistment and a promotion were put on hold as I began the biggest battle of my life: to falsely prove I was not gay in order to save my career.

Courts-martial kicked the case back to my squadron because nobody wanted to touch such a sensitive topic. The day before my administrative separation board was to be held, homosexuality was added to my charges and the focus of the case shifted.

I was found not guilty of the charge of sexual harassment, but guilty of the charge of being gay. Despite the shining character references by my superiors supplied, the board members recommended an honorable discharge and sent me on my way.

My career was placed on hold, and I was tasked with mundane jobs on the base while my senators and congressman appealed the decision to the Department of Defense and the Secretary of the Navy. I was finally allowed to reenlist after having extended my term every month for four months, but I realized I needed to protect myself. So, I married a male friend who understood my dilemma.



I was sexually harassed daily throughout my career and, on three separate occasions, sexually assaulted by male coworkers after I passed out from too much drinking. I've been a fighter all my life and never complained about much, so I never said anything. I also feared the arguments against having women in the military would be proven correct if anyone found out what was going on. I'd recently played a part in introducing women on combat ships and in other combat roles in different branches, and I was excited to be involved in that history.

I left the Navy after 10 years of being a jet mechanic, two stints in rehab for alcohol, eight failed relationships, three rapes, one possible miscarriage, six deployments, four units, 10 different addresses, a fake marriage, and a partridge in a pear tree! Next, I headed to the Army to become a counselor so I could help others.

I trained to be a Combat Medic/Mental Health Specialist and Career Counselor and, soon after, was deployed to Iraq during the initial invasion. I witnessed more harassment, pain, and misery there and often felt that military women were there as eye candy for the 'boys.' But just as I did in the Navy, I tried to fit in and be one of the guys.

I was alone and lonely and, again, unable to talk about my life and my partner and about how much I missed her. Instead, I had to use my fake marriage as a cover. I served in five units, lived in five states, endured one long deployment, five failed

relationships, one real marriage (after gay marriages were allowed), one fake divorce, one real divorce, lost an eight-year run at sobriety (followed by another six-year run), earned a bachelor's degree, and saw the repeal of DADT, which somehow angered me.

After 22 years of service, I was retired due to a bad back. Had the military not retired me I would probably still be there, and I don't know why that is. I feel like I don't belong anywhere else, and maybe abuse is all I'll ever know. I have finally been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and military sexual trauma and have joined a therapy group to examine my injuries and attempt to make repairs.

My entire life has been spent living within extremes: too much bad and too little good. I am slowly starting to find the middle where there is calm.