

ROTARY

November 2022

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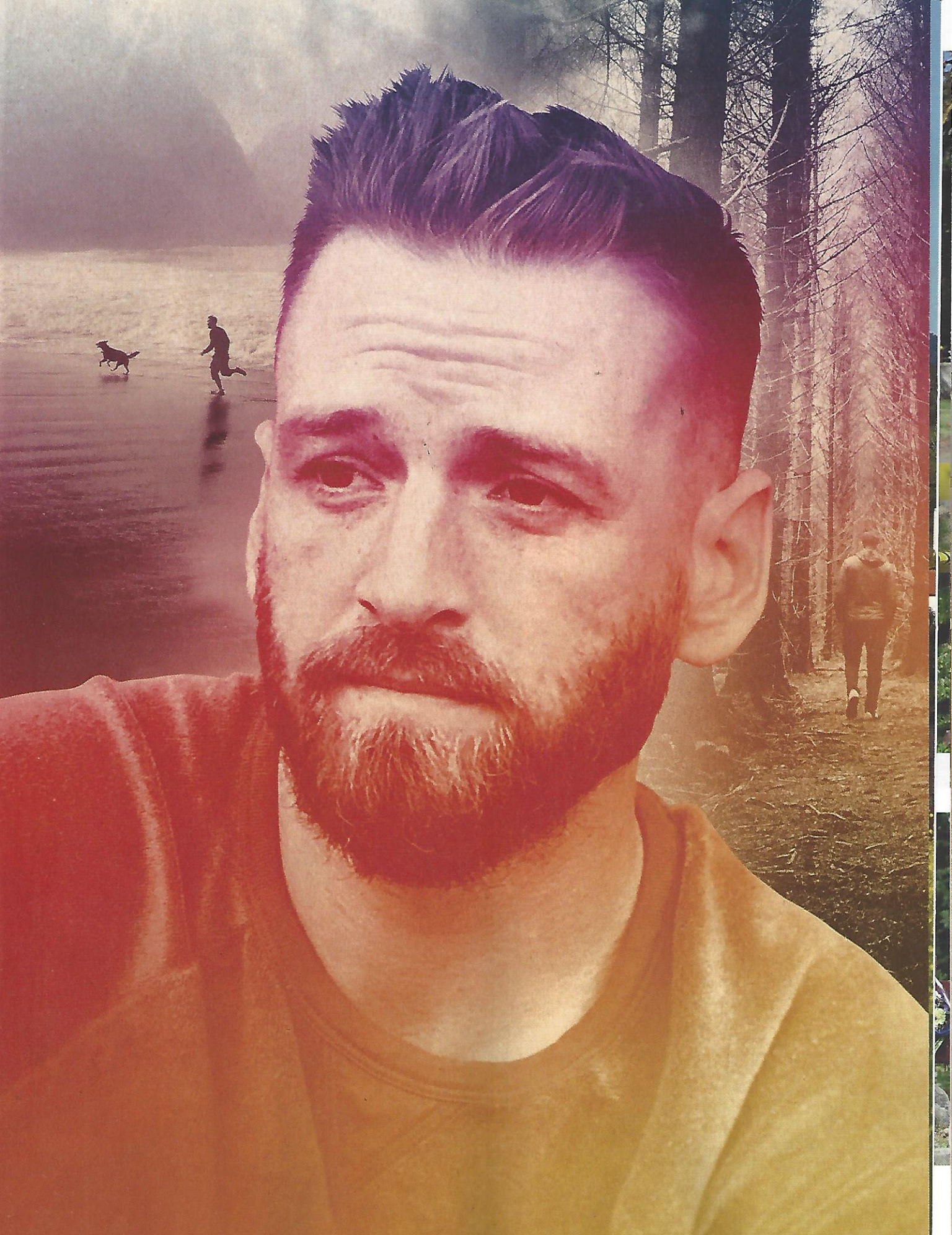
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Rotary 

Home from war, a hard-won struggle to find peace

*With Rotary
members behind
him, an Iraq veteran
works through his
trauma — and
adopts a mission
to help others*

By Kate Silver
Illustration by Sean McCabe



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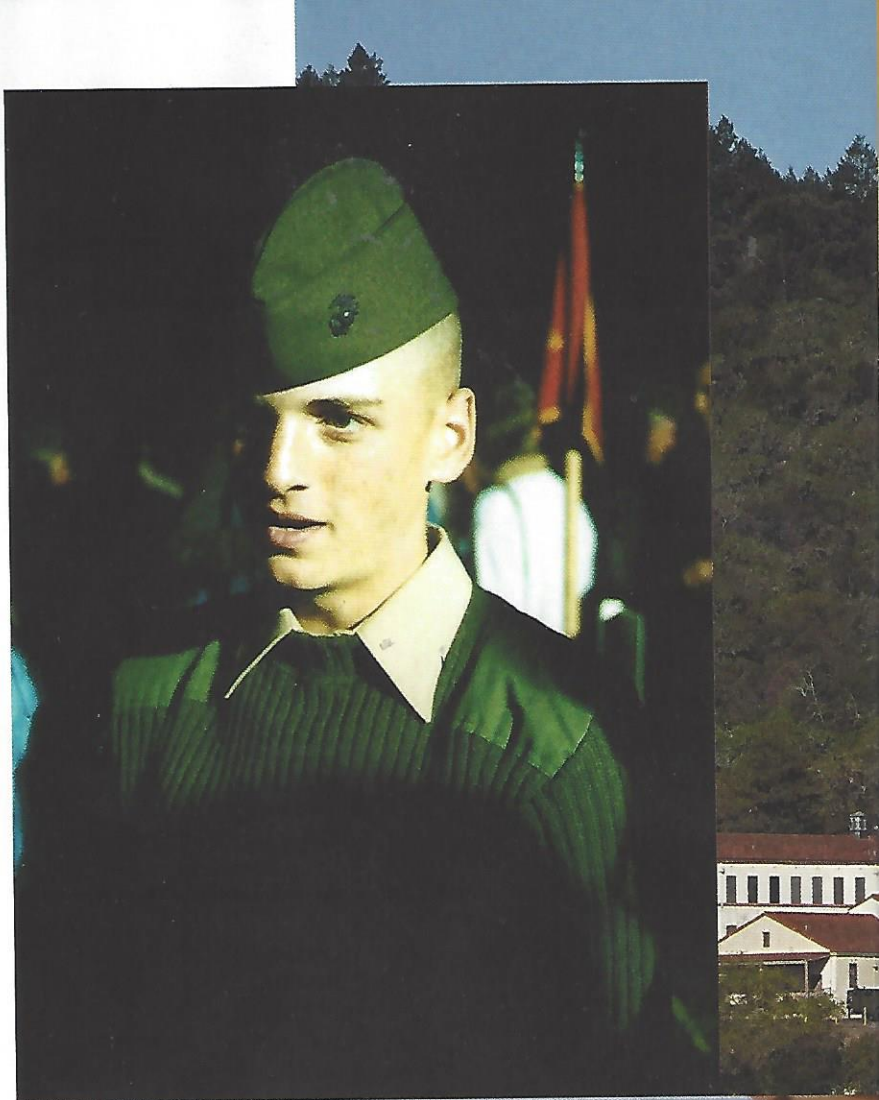
ach Skiles thought he was fine.

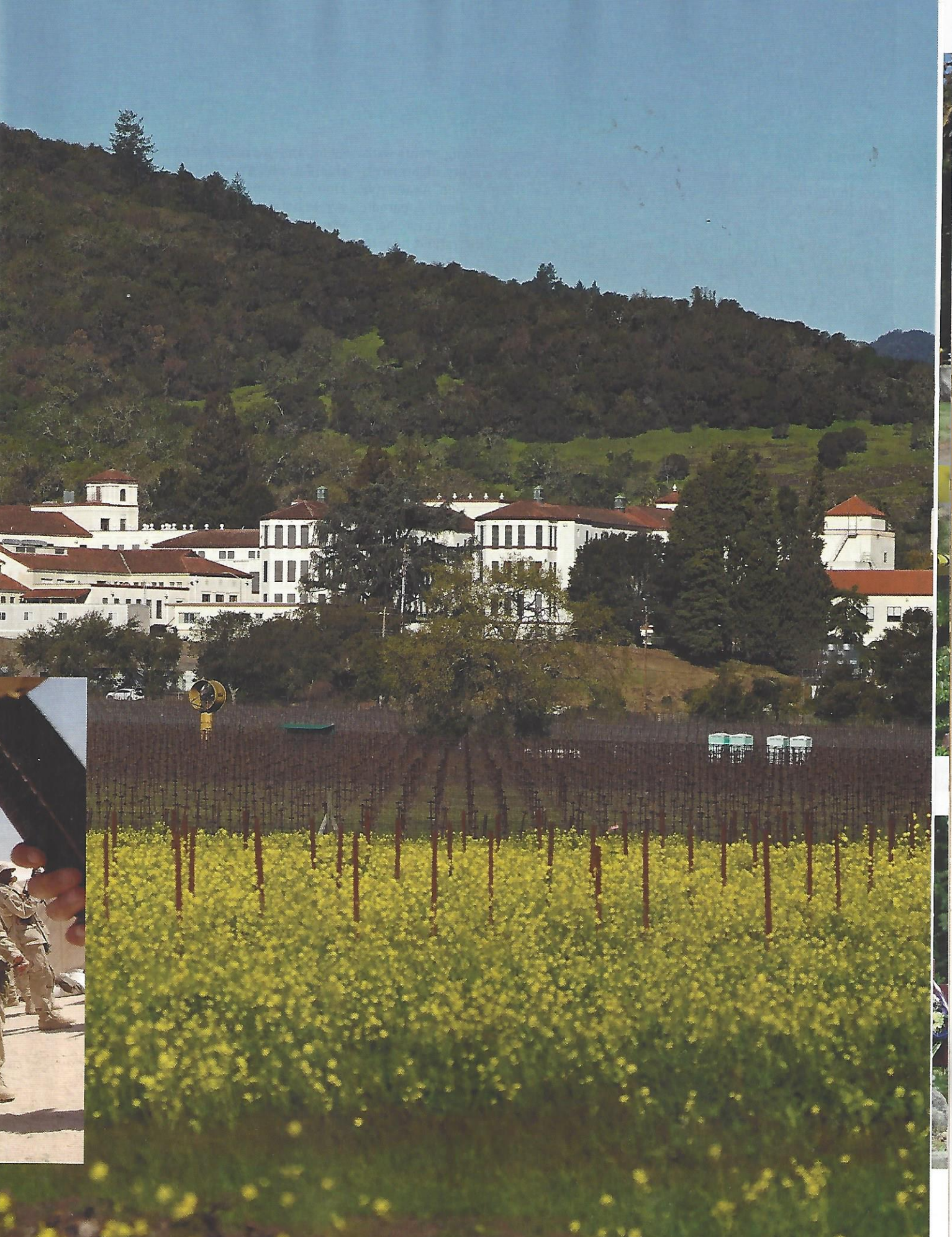
He completed his time in the Marines at 22 in 2004 after serving in the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. His unit was shelled so many times he'd lost count. He was mourning friends lost in combat. But he was home, ready for what was next. "I was just happy to be alive," he says.

Still, the tendrils of war followed him. Skiles, soft-spoken with kind green eyes, found himself waking up to his own screams at night. He had spells where he'd wind up in a public place, like a Walmart, with no idea how he got there. "I didn't realize that I was in a bit of shock," he says. "And I continued to just disassociate every day."

For those first few years, he bounced between San Francisco and Los Angeles, worked different jobs, and took college classes. He even acted in local theater, channeling his anger into rage-filled characters. But when that anger and frustration started to consume him, he numbed himself with booze and weed. He fell hard for conspiracy theories about the 9/11 terrorist attacks and found himself using phrases like "New World Order" and "the Illuminati." He got fired from his job in 2008 when his employer learned he'd been organizing conspiracy-oriented demonstrations in the community. "Then I slowly spiraled and ended up homeless," he says. "My family didn't really know what to do." After crashing on a friend's couch, he started sleeping on park benches in the Bay Area.

Clockwise from top left: Zach Skiles enlisted in the U.S. Marines in 2000 when he was 18 years old; the Veterans Home of California-Yountville, where Pathway Home was located; Marines at Camp Commando in Kuwait, where Skiles was deployed in 2003.





People closest to him told him he needed help. But to Skiles, they were the ones in the wrong. He'd kept in touch with fellow Marines and said everyone else in his unit was going through similar things. They were all dealing with their troubles in their own way. He would too.

In December 2009, Skiles went to a Veterans Affairs facility in Palo Alto for health services. Now that he was homeless, it was clear he wasn't doing fine. A social worker told him the Pathway Home could offer him support and a bed immediately.

The Pathway Home was founded in 2007, initially funded by an anonymous donor's \$5.6 million grant. The private facility leased space on the Veterans Home of California-Yountville campus, a sprawling, serene spread of Mission-style buildings, dotted with redwoods. Built in the 1880s, the Veterans Home is the largest in the country, and more than 600 veterans live in the community. In contrast, the Pathway Home worked with about 40 residents at a time, providing individual and group counseling, educational classes, help accessing VA benefits, job referrals, and more. Most would stay four to six months, but some remained as long as a year.

Pathway Home's overarching goal was to help veterans reintegrate into civilian life. The vets worked to move beyond or learn to manage the demons of war, trying to avoid adding to the high number of veterans who die by suicide, averaging 17 people every day in 2019. Brown University's Costs of War Project estimated in 2021 that more than 30,000 people who served in wars soon after the 2001 terrorist attacks have died by suicide. That's more than four times the number who died in military operations in those wars. The researchers attribute the alarming suicide rate to high exposure to trauma, stress, military culture and training, continued access to guns, and the difficulty of rejoining civilian life.

Belittled as "shell shock" or "war neurosis" during World War I, post-traumatic stress disorder was finally recognized as an official medical diagnosis in 1980 and defined as the difficulty

recovering after terrifying events with symptoms such as anxiety, nightmares, flashbacks, and depression. As the toll of PTSD became increasingly apparent, therapists started to take it more seriously and tried to understand how to better support traumatized clients.

In the early days of the Pathway Home, its founder and executive director, Fred Gusman, a social worker and mental health specialist who worked with traumatized veterans for more than two decades, spoke to the Rotary Club of Napa, California. He told members about the startling suicide statistics and described how some veterans in crisis wait months before finding a bed in a treatment facility.

The speech shook Napa Rotarian Gary Rose. A problem-solver by nature, he began thinking about ways to help and remembered a charity bike ride in Napa called Cycle for Sight, which once meandered along the hilly vineyard-lined roads and benefited Enchanted Hills, a camp for blind and partially sighted people. The ride had once been popular but hadn't taken place in nearly two decades. What if Rotary were to help bring back the event to also benefit veterans?

Rose and other Rotarians, including Dorothy Salmon and then-Club President Steve Orndorf (he died in 2020), started fundraising and figuring out the logistics. With the help of other area nonprofits and Rotary clubs, including Pacifica, San Rafael, and Brentwood, they launched Cycle for Sight/Rotary Ride for Veterans in 2008. It drew cyclists from across the Bay Area for picturesque 15-, 25-, and 50-mile rides, ending with food, music, and wine. The

event was such a hit that it raised more than \$2 million by 2019 for the Pathway Home, drawing more than 2,000 riders a year before COVID-19 forced it to go virtual. "The love the veterans got from the community was crazy," says Rose.

After learning about the Pathway Home through the VA, Skiles agreed to check in, but not until after the year-end holidays. By choice, he spent Christmas alone, sleeping outside on a bench.

He arrived at the home in January 2010, still in full denial. Looking around the treatment facility, he quickly decided that all the veterans there were crazy, except for him. "I don't deserve to be here," he told himself.

But he stayed, because what else was he going to do? Slowly, over those first few weeks, he noticed how much he had in common with the others. Many of them, too, experienced bouts of rage, confusion, and terror. He attended classes and therapy sessions, participated in yoga and meditation groups. He started building trust and friendships, reflecting on his life and the steps that got him to that point.

When Skiles joined the military in 2000, at 18, he was a sweet and sensitive kid with an easy smile and a quick laugh. He was smart. But he was lost. He'd dropped out of high school and was living in a friend's attic while working at a video rental store. He knew he needed to get it together, but he wasn't sure how. That's when a tall, strapping man in a sharp, blue Marine uniform walked into

More than 30,000 people who served in wars soon after the 2001 terrorist attacks have died by suicide.

the store. "He was such a good-looking dude," recalls Skiles. "I was like, 'Oh, man. Yeah. Tell me what you got.'"

The U.S. Marine was a recruiter. Whatever he said, Skiles took away from the conversation concepts like outdoors, discipline, respect, education, direction, positive male role models. Skiles was 5-foot-7 and 110 pounds. He'd never held a gun. He enlisted in the Marines.

He never found the job easy. Initially, he was sent to a unit in Okinawa, Japan, that was being investigated because so many of its service members had died by suicide, he recalls. The environment felt toxic from the get-go. "The philosophy was that hate and discontent needed to bleed through the ranks to breed efficiency, and people would stay tough," he says. On 9/11, he found out about the planes, the towers, the all-consuming shock when an ex-girlfriend called and asked him to come home. The acts of war had struck home.

But Skiles, an optimist through and through, told himself he would be OK. Even when his unit deployed to Camp Commando, Kuwait, in January 2003, his understanding was that the situation was a "show of force," and not war. He'd convinced himself he could talk his way out of any conflict and not have to harm anyone. But on 19 March, President George W. Bush announced the start of the war, and the first Iraqi missile hit the gate of Skiles' camp, blowing him off his feet. From then on, seemingly every half hour for weeks, his unit came under attack. He knew he had to radically shift his mindset. "I was like, I have to fight," he recalls, "because I'm not going to live if I just sit here talking about things."

As a driver, he delivered fuel, provided convoys security, and helped build infrastructure in Iraq. Along the way, he'd hear Scud missiles approach. "Six to 12 would fire off at once," he says. "They'll eventually end up either on top of you or in front of you or behind you."

Late at night, as he tried to sleep, the barracks filled with traumatized screams.

From top: After listening to a presentation from the founder of Pathway Home, the Rotary Club of Napa launched the Cycle for Sight/ Rotary Ride for Veterans in 2008 to raise money for the facility; the ride drew more than 2,000 cyclists a year before the COVID-19 pandemic; club members built relationships with the veterans and took them fishing, hiking, and bowling.



How your Rotary club can support veterans

After working with veterans for more than 10 years, the Rotary Club of Napa created a guidebook called *Serving Those Who Have Served: Helping Rotarians Better Serve Veterans*.

"The goal of this guidebook is to provide a road map for any Rotarian who has thought, 'I'd like to help veterans, but I don't know how,'" says Dorothy Salmon, a club member and past club president, who spearheaded the guide and produced it with the help of author Suzanne Gordon. "It's intended as a gift from one Rotary club in Napa to thousands of Rotary clubs across the country."

You can download the guidebook for free at naparotary.org.



Cycle for Sight/Rotary Ride for Veterans raised more than \$2 million for the Pathway Home. Members of the Rotary Club of Brentwood, California, were among the supporters.

The Rotarians' involvement with the Pathway Home went beyond their fundraising ride. Napa club members took the veterans hiking, fishing, and bowling. They helped them write résumés and introduced them to prospective employers. When the Pathway Home needed supplies such as blankets, the Rotarians helped out. Napa Rotarian Kent Gardella contacted a quilt business, and it made quilts for each veteran in their favorite colors and each embroidered with a vet's name, paid for with money raised by Rotary members. One Mother's Day, Gardella, who owns a jewelry store, invited Pathway Home residents to choose an item from his store to give their mom or wife as a gift.

Gardella, a Vietnam veteran, tears up when he reflects on all the times he spent with the veterans. The relationships with the veterans would grow to mean more to the Rotary members than they ever anticipated. "We didn't baby them," he says. "They're really amazing young people, and that we get to spend time with them, that's a privilege."

Things were starting to come together for Skiles. After a few months at the Pathway Home, he felt a sense of acceptance. Every week, he looked forward to bowling night, when the Rotarians would treat everyone to burgers, fries, and milkshakes. The friendship and time they gave felt more like normalcy than anything he'd experienced in years. "At your lowest, having people who still want to genuinely connect is really special," he says. "When the rest of the world has kind of washed their hands of you, having people who want to enjoy you and be supportive is a unique experience that honestly wasn't really in my life."

In his free time, Skiles devoured books suggested by one of his therapists on the psychological toll of combat. During group sessions, some clinic leaders recognized he had a gift for therapy. Gusman, in particular, encouraged him to consider it as a career path. And his Rotary friends agreed.

"We convinced him, 'Hey, you're really a smart kid,'" Salmon recalls. "You need to go back to school."

And that's what he did. The boy who had once dropped out of high school started down a highly academic path, getting his bachelor's in psychology, and his doctorate in clinical psychology at the Wright Institute in Berkeley, California. Along the way, he worked in positions that validated that he was doing the right thing, for him and for others — first as a peer counselor at the Pathway Home, then starting a PTSD clinic in South Sudan for veterans and family members of the Sudanese People's Liberation Army, then with the Department of Veterans Affairs, where he further developed a program at the Martinez VA Medical Center (located between Napa and San Francisco) that was similar to the Pathway Home. He continued meditating and practiced mindfulness to calm his anxiety. He wasn't perfect, but he was better and, he thought, probably as good as he was going to get.

On 9 March 2018, tragedy struck again — this time at the Pathway Home.

Afghanistan War veteran Albert Wong rented a car and drove to the facility, where he'd lived until a couple of weeks earlier when he was discharged for not complying with regulations. That day, he interrupted a going-away party for two staff members. He was carrying a 12-gauge shotgun and a .308-caliber semi-automatic rifle.

After ordering the veteran residents out, he held three staff members hostage: Executive Director Christine Loeber and psychologists Jennifer Gray Golick and Jennifer Gonzales Shushereba, who was pregnant. When a Napa County sheriff's deputy arrived, shots were exchanged. Wong killed the three women, then killed himself.

For Skiles to call the shootings devastating is an understatement — not only because of the lives lost, but also because this program, which treated nearly 460 veterans since its founding, was now scarred.



On that day, Skiles was leaving class in San Francisco when he heard about the hostage situation from a friend as it was unfolding. He started to drive to Napa, thinking that he could reason with the guy, talk him down. But when he turned on the car radio, he learned it was too late. He went for a hike and tried to process everything.

Salmon, of the Napa Rotary club, joined the board of the Pathway Home in 2009 and was supposed to be at the party that day. On her way, she stopped to have her car serviced. She told the mechanics not to wash it when they were done because she was running late. But they did wash

On 9 March 2018, a former Pathway Home resident killed three staff members and himself. Although the facility shut down after the shooting, Napa club members continue to raise money for veterans and have created a guidebook outlining ways Rotary clubs can help.



the car, making her even more late — and possibly saving her life.

After the shooting, the Pathway Home shut down. But Salmon, who served as the home's president from 2013 to 2018, was determined not to let the shooting be the end of the story. "I said to the Rotary club and to the Pathway Home board, are we going to let this be our legacy, after years of incredible success?" says Salmon. "This cannot be the story. The story needs to be about how everybody — especially Rotary clubs — can jump in and make this partnership amazing."

To this day, the Rotary Club of Napa raises money for a program called Post Deployment Assessment Treatment that works with veterans at the Martinez VA Medical Center's outpatient clinic.

Salmon also hired a writer to create a guidebook outlining how Rotary clubs can support veterans. It decodes what the VA does and explores how these partnerships can offer a path to serve veterans.

The Pathway Home tragedy jolted Skiles. But it didn't shake him from his path. As much as ever, veterans needed help.

While in doctoral-level clinical training in 2018, he received an invitation through a friend that intrigued him: to travel to Mexico to serve as a clinician for an organization called the Mission Within, which provides therapy using psychedelics to veterans with PTSD, traumatic brain injuries, anxiety, and other conditions. Psychedelics, used medicinally since ancient times, are experiencing something of a renaissance, as scientists try to better understand what kind of promise they might hold in treating conditions such as depression, substance abuse, and PTSD. Many veterans have been vocal advocates for the broader use of treatment with psychedelics, which have been decriminalized in some states and towns in recent years, and the VA itself is investigating psychedelic treatments.

With his science-minded curiosity piqued, Skiles traveled to Ensenada. He planned to be an observer but agreed to

participate in the therapy himself, for a deeper understanding. Under watchful observation, he took 5-MeO-DMT, a psychedelic found in plants and secreted by the glands of the Sonoran desert toad.

On the top of a mountain, looking over a beach, surrounded by wild horses, he felt his stress and worries lifting. Some mental scars of Iraq dissipated. He felt levity for the first time in as long as he could remember. "The only way I've been able to describe it is that I'm not carrying things that I thought I would carry for the rest of my life," says Skiles. "I think it's comparable to 10 years of meditation in a matter of minutes."

He wanted to share this experience with others and set out to learn more about the science behind psychedelic treatments and PTSD. His timing couldn't have been better. Across the globe, universities and hospitals — including the Johns Hopkins Center for Psychedelic and Consciousness Research, Massachusetts General Hospital Center for the Neuroscience of Psychedelics, and the Centre for Psychedelic Research at Imperial College London — have launched programs dedicated to studying the field.

Skiles earned a certificate in psychedelic-assisted therapies and research from the California Institute of Integral Studies, and from late 2021 until

mid-2022, he held a research position at a lab at the University of California San Francisco that studies psychedelics, called the Translational Psychedelic Research Program.

Skiles says many people with post-traumatic stress experience a kind of "over-activation" in parts of their brains, and some brain structures can atrophy over a long period. Psychedelics affect the brain's serotonin receptors, and Skiles describes the effect as helping to restore the chemical balance.

At the UC San Francisco lab, Andrew Penn, a psychiatric nurse practitioner and an associate clinical professor at the university's School of Nursing, studies psilocybin-assisted therapy in areas such as treating depression. The lab is testing the hypothesis of whether psilocybin — the hallucinogenic compound from so-called magic mushrooms — causes brain structure changes, allowing people to be more flexible in their thinking and to navigate their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors differently, when coupled with intensive psychotherapy.

"The brain creates these sort of grooves, if you will, of thought and emotion," Penn says. "It's like if you're skiing at the end of the day, you have to ski in other people's tracks because you're forced into these slots. But if it snows overnight, that same hill is like fresh powder; you can go anywhere you want."

Skiles set out to learn more about the science behind psychedelic treatments and PTSD.



Psilocybin is like the fresh powder.”

Penn calls Skiles, who helped design and run studies, “one of the stars of the lab.” He brings experience, wisdom, and integrity. Plus, adds Penn, “He’s just a heck of a nice guy.”

Skiles now works as a therapist at the Portland VA Medical Center for veterans seeking therapy with psilocybin and MDMA (better known as ecstasy) through the Veterans Health Administration in Oregon, the first state to legalize psilocybin. The Food and Drug Administration designated MDMA as a breakthrough therapy for PTSD, which is meant to speed up the approval process, and final-stage safety testing is underway.

Skiles, who proudly attaches PsyD to his name for his psychology doctorate, feels like he’s doing exactly what he should be doing. In the military, he learned to operate as a part of a unit. Now, nearly two decades after his service, he refuses to leave his fellow Marines behind.

Spiritually speaking, Skiles has a theory that he’s been put into places and situations that are about to take a turn for the worse. It happened when he became a warrior. And it led him to his path as a healer. “My duty,” he says, “is to make things better.” ■

Right: Skiles at the Esalen Institute, a retreat in California. Below, from left: Skiles in Ensenada, Mexico, where he saw the potential of using psychedelics to treat PTSD; Skiles works with other veterans using psilocybin-assisted therapy; with his friend Nate, also a graduate of Pathway Home.



PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF ZACH SKILES

