

Barbara Van Dahlen, PhD, Time 100 Most Influential People

Video courtesy of Time Magazine

Jennifer Crane, U.S. Army veteran: Something had just broken inside from all the things I had done while I was over there. I said "I'm going to kill myself, and I know how I'm going to do it." I didn't want to use knives, I didn't want to use a gun, I didn't want to throw myself off a balcony. I was going to let the drugs do it, because it was going to be slow, and it was going to be painful, and that was what I deserved.

Barbara Van Dahlen, Founder, Give an Hour: Once that experience happens, the trauma, it becomes part of you, it will always be part of you. And we've got to help those who serve, and their families, and the rest of us understand – that's ok.

I'm a clinical psychologist and I had a practice in Washington, DC. I started hearing stories about people coming home who were literally living out of their cars. It was clear that we weren't ready to meet the needs of those who have served our country and their families.

And so I thought, well, if I'm sitting here in my office in suburban Maryland, and I would be willing to give, literally, an hour of my time to see someone for free, I assume that mental health professionals throughout the country would feel the same way.

Text: Since 2005, Give an Hour has donated over 50,000 hours of counseling to veterans and their families.

Jennifer Crane: It is very difficult for me to let someone else into my head. For the first time ever I told people what I had been through. When I first came home I would spend days, weeks, isolated, trying to stay away from the public. I had nightmares that, God, they were horrible. I had this recurring one that actually involved my family, and my family was in Afghanistan and they were being killed.

And I started using stimulants, and it was great. They kept me awake, I didn't have nightmares anymore. And when I did sleep, I literally blacked out. So I avoided all of those things that were haunting me. I dropped out of school, lost every job I was given, and eventually ended up living out of my car. I was a soldier, I was a warrior, and I came home and I became this monster.

Jeanine: We worked so hard to get you out of that – the idea that you're broken. You're not.

Jennifer Crane: I met my therapist, Jeanine. I wanted to continue seeing her, but I told her, you know, I was broke. I said I couldn't afford it. She told me "I'm a provider with this organization, a nonprofit, called Give an Hour, and we're people who donate our time to vets and their families." I said "What does that mean?" She said "It means you can come see me for free."

Barbara Van Dahlen: I think there's been a desire to find the magic bullet, you know – what will fix people who have post-traumatic stress. And there is no fix, it's not something you can do X, Y and Z, and somebody's done.

Jennifer Crane: When I first went on Give an Hour's website, it was "we'll give our time to you if you give an hour back to your community." So I actually wrote to the website, and said, is there something I can do to give back for what you've done for me? I ended up getting an email back from the president of the organization, and she said, would you mind telling your story?

"I suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. Reintegration? That was something I didn't know how to do, and I didn't know where to turn when I came home."

This was my first speech. I didn't know what I was doing, I was so nervous, my voice was shaking.

"It took years of agony before I began to find help. A large percent of our homeless population are veterans, and I was one of them."

Barbara Van Dahlen: It's very moving to hear her talk, because it's from the heart, it's real, it's honest, it's unvarnished.

Jennifer Crane: The very end of this is the most ... is the reason why I kept doing why I'm doing. It says, "Some scars cannot be seen by the human eyes, but we all have them, it is what we choose to do with them that makes the difference. Thank you."

It was incredible, that people actually cared. And I was like "I want to do this; I've got to find a way to keep doing this. So it kind of snowballed, and all of a sudden I became the first spokesperson for Give an Hour. I now get to actually work for the organization that has literally given me my life back.

(In car) All right Haley, we're going to come back and see you at lunch, ok? And then we're going to go over and see Uncle Mike today.

Barbara Van Dahlen: Some people who experience trauma, once they heal from the painful aspects of that, actually grow. Jen was just on the edge of actually reclaiming her life when I met her. Now it's sort of fully claimed.

Jennifer Crane: As far as what I have today, I have my husband, I have my daughter, I have Give an Hour. I don't think it's in the cards for me to have more than I need. But I definitely have everything I need. And I never thought my life would pan out that way.