

# ROCK FOR VETS

## MUSIC IS THE REMEDY

By Frank McIlquham, Executive Director, and Katherine McIlquham, Administrator

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a debilitating mental health condition that is prevalent among combat veterans. Studies suggest about 15 percent of all veterans suffer permanently from PTSD, and an estimated 30 percent of veterans have had PTSD in their lifetime.

Findings suggest that music is effective in reducing depression symptoms and improving health-related quality of life. These two facts were the reasons for the creation of the Long Beach-based Rock For Vets Music Program.

In 2009, Frank McIlquham, a retired banker and professional drummer, and Vietnam Army War veteran Jerry Salas, who had returned to civilian life with difficulty maintaining healthy relationships and adjusting to civilian life, connected through their love of music. They wanted to help veterans suffering from mental or physical wounds. What they found was that music is a catalyst for healing, rebuilding self-confidence, and reducing everyday stress.

Rock For Vets is the flagship program for the local nonprofit organization The Rock Club Music Is The Remedy. It is a free music program open to all veterans. No musical ability is required to join, just the willingness to let go, focus on good energy, and learn a craft or harness a passion.

The program was first introduced for the vets at the VA Hospital Long Beach via a choral program. Veterans wandered into the music room and picked up instruments, some for the first time. After quiet encouragement and a lesson or two, the veterans started playing together.

As the program grew, Rock For Vets looked for a new home. In 2015, Tim Cable, the manager of the Long Beach Scottish Rite (originally opened in 1926), offered Rock For Vets a safe space for veterans to learn, listen, enjoy coffee and snacks, and meet others. Tim has been a godsend to the veterans and charges as much as Rock For Vets charges veterans to join the program – nothing. The LB Scottish Rite has now become Rock For Vets’ rehearsal hall and home, thanks to Tim Cable.

The veterans meet weekly, and the program provides an opportunity to learn to play a musical instrument or sing and become part of the band guided by former and current professionals from the music industry, such as Jerry Salas, lead singer for El Chicano; Charles Fearing, a studio/touring musician who recorded and performed with Celine Dion, Barry Manilow, and Barry White, and has a star on the Walk of Fame for his time with Ray Parker Jr. and Raydio; and Bryan Keonen, who is not a veteran but fixes all the equipment and helps with sound and technical issues.

Since its inception, Rock For Vets has helped over 300 local veterans and is always looking to help more.

Rock For Vets members join the band to regain that sense of brotherhood/sisterhood they found while on active duty. Others join as a way of dealing with PTSD and other effects of war.



Los Angeles County Supervisor Janice Hahn accepts an award of recognition for her ongoing support of Rock for Vets. Photo courtesy of Supervisor Hahn’s office

Rock For Vets proves that music can heal, not only for those performing, but those who listen.

At this time, when they’re not able to meet in person, members of The Rock Club Music Is The Remedy have their own remedy for stay-inside orders: Quarantine Singing Circle. Sign up at the website to receive email notices for the next sing-along.

Rock For Vets is about giving back to those who faithfully served their country and are now in need of support. By developing coping skills, compassion, self-esteem, and communication skills, veterans are able to slowly reenter life. As one veteran said, “This program gave me a reason to live. I no longer have thoughts of suicide.” ■

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