

# Veteran tends to SORCC\* 'healing garden'

Veteran tends to SORCC flowers ... and his wounds



**Veteran Heath Hughes waters the gardens twice a day at the Southern Oregon Rehabilitation Center and Clinics in White City, Oregon**

July 25, 2014

By [Teresa Thomas](#)

Mail Tribune

Heath Hughes came to the Southern Oregon Rehabilitation Center and Clinics in White City with two bags, a broken heart and a green thumb.

The 55-year-old veteran was born and raised on his parents' chicken and pig farm in Bauxite, Ark., population 500. He and his two siblings still own about an acre and a half of the property, where he would grow "lots of okra, lots of turnip greens and lots of country food, Arkansas food," he said. His neighbors loved him for all the produce he would give away.

Hughes served four years — 1984 to 1988 — in the Navy as a hull technician aboard the USS Vincennes. After that, he did pest control for about 13 years and also was an in-home patient caretaker for the elderly.

But mostly, he worked to manage his alcoholism, he said.

Then, on Dec. 29, 2011, Hughes' wife of nearly 12 and a half years, Michelle "Mikki" Hughes, died for unknown reasons. "It was out of the blue," Hughes said. "They put hypothermia on her death certificate. "I went berserk and I started drinking myself to death," he said, adding that he typically went through a half-gallon of vodka a day. "Then, one day, I decided the alcohol wasn't working fast enough."

On Jan. 17 of this year, two days after his birthday, Hughes loaded his gun and put it in his mouth, prepared to end his life. But first he glanced at his dog, Tolliver, a Dalmatian and border collie mix

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\* U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' Southern Oregon Rehabilitation Center and Clinics

"He was looking at me like, "Don't do it, Daddy," Hughes recalled. And he didn't. Instead, he called 911 and, soon after, enrolled in his ninth, 28-day drug and alcohol rehabilitation program.

Hughes worried that when the program ended he would return to his former habits as he had every other time. But before he was released, Hughes happened to overhear another veteran, who is currently a resident at SORCC, talking about a long-term program in White City, Oregon.

Hughes' case manager arranged for him to receive treatment at SORCC and to stay two weeks longer at a treatment center in North Little Rock, Ark., while SORCC was closed because of a norovirus outbreak.

"I was accepted here and ready to come when I realized it was a 34-hour drive, and there were way too many alcohol stores between here and there," Hughes said.

Air Compassion for Veterans stepped in and paid for Hughes' airfare. Hughes arrived at SORCC on March 4. Later, in an email to Air Compassion, Hughes thanked the organization for saving his life.

At SORCC, Hughes attends regular Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous meetings, and, for nearly a month, has participated in a bereavement program through WinterSpring in Ashland. He's been sober a little over six months.

Hughes suffers from a neurological disorder called Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome — a thiamine-deficiency caused by alcoholism — that affects his memory and muscle coordination. SORCC staff responded to this problem by giving Hughes an iPad with an application called **My Bionic Brain**® that prompts him to perform routine tasks — brush his teeth, take his medication, etc. - and records when he has completed them. He wears it in a black satchel slung over his shoulder.

The VA has given iPads featuring this "cognitive prosthetic" to three other veterans in the last year, said SORCC spokeswoman Rhonda Haney.

"Before **My Bionic Brain**® came along, if I wanted to know if I had brushed my teeth, I would have to go check my toothbrush to see if it was wet," Hughes said.

However, Hughes doesn't need to be reminded to tend his garden.



Over the years, residents have volunteered to maintain one or more of the 13 raised beds in the facilities' "healing garden." But this year, only two people stepped up, so Hughes said he would manage the others.

"If the sun is up, you can find me here or in the greenhouse," Hughes said Tuesday as he walked around the garden admiring his plants.

In addition to the 11 raised beds, Hughes also tends several pots, hanging baskets and window boxes, as well as a large garden around the perimeter. It takes Hughes about two hours to water everything, and he waters twice a day.



Photos by Bob Pennell

Hughes was in a motorcycle crash a few years ago and now has a "bum shoulder," so someone helps him with the heavy weeding.

Last year, a handful of veterans volunteered to care for some of the raised beds but eventually lost interest, leaving Dan Cully, a peer support specialist for SORCC's Psychosocial Rehabilitation and Recovery Clinic, to tend the abandoned plants. This year, Cully said he was more than happy to let Hughes take over.

"I could see he was going to do a great job, but I didn't expect to see the results we are seeing now," Cully said. "He went above and beyond what I imagined that garden could look like."

When Hughes started, there were a few snapdragons, carnations, strawberry plants and rose bushes, but now a wide variety of flowers and vegetables flourish in his lush, not-so-secret garden.

Although Cully did purchase some starts, most of the plants, including one sunflower with an 11-foot stalk, Hughes started from seeds in the greenhouse. There are tomatoes, broccoli, okra, cucumbers, raspberries, gourds and delicate scarlet runner beans, which Hughes wrapped around a wire archway he made.

"I saw it in Better Homes and Gardens (magazine)," he said of the archway. "In a month, you'll be able to walk through here and pick the beans."

Hughes harvests the vegetables and leaves them in baskets for people to take. He plans to make birdhouses out of the gourds.

Petunias, African daisies, marigolds and morning glories are tucked between the leafy vegetables.

"Morning glories are probably my favorite," he said as he wrapped a vine around a duct-taped bamboo trellis he made. "A lot of people think of them as weeds, but you can do whatever you want with them."

Every morning, around 6 a.m., Hughes says "good morning" to his plants, and every night, around 10 p.m., he tells them "goodnight."

"I spend a lot of time and take a lot of pride in my garden, and I care about every plant," he said.

Cully said he's noticed that Hughes is smiling more and has more self-esteem since he started working in the garden.

Hughes' discharge date is tentatively set for Dec. 15, but already, he doesn't want to leave. "I like it here," he said. "And there are too many bad memories back home."

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