

A Practice of Giving

By Lisa Donovan

Jumping out of a helicopter is a risk-filled venture for anyone. For Dr. George Cogar, it became the catalyst for a major shift in his life's path. When the young Marine fractured his spine during a helicopter training exercise in 1976, his plans for military service began to retreat as thoughts of a career in psychology advanced to the frontline.

After earning a bachelor's degree cum laude in political science at Eastern Michigan University in 1974, Cogar enlisted in Officer Candidates School in Quantico, Va. He felt that experience in the military was vital for his self-maturation process.

"I wanted to serve my country as my relatives had since the Civil War," said Cogar, who obtained the rank of second lieutenant. "I view being a Marine as the proudest accomplishment of my life."

But the healing process for his spinal fracture was slow and uncertain. After over two months in the Quantico, Va. Naval Hospital and one of three eventual spine surgeries, Cogar learned that his injury was too severe. He would not be able to return to active military duty.

His body may have been inactive during recovery, but his mind was in full gear. He became an astute observer of the after-effects of war on American soldiers and sailors. "I saw a lot of Vietnam vets in pain and struggling to figure out what to do with their lives," said Cogar. "I became introspective about human behavior and adjustment."

Those hospital observations became the jumping off point for the next phase of his life. Cogar returned to his alma mater and poured his energies into studying with professors such as George Cantor, who opened his eyes to the possibilities of psychology. "I found the psychology of personalities very fascinating," said Cogar, who earned a master's degree in guidance and counseling in 1977.

Although he completed his master's degree with financial support from the Marines, he never forgot the monetary struggles of his undergraduate years. As a commuter from a poor working class family in Saline, Mich., every penny for tuition and books was hard won. In between classes and studying, Cogar mowed lawns, employed his construction skills and started a security business with another EMU student. There was no time to enjoy the social activities of campus life.

Thirty seven years after first setting foot on Eastern's campus, Cogar's recollections of his undergraduate struggles were the impetus for a generous donation to the university. In August, Cogar and his wife, Darlene Shaw, made a \$1 million planned gift to benefit future students with financial need. EMU president Susan Martin commended them for enabling the university to provide scholarships to students who would otherwise be unable to attend college. As a personal favor, Senator Carl Levin graciously participated in the announcement on campus.

"I identify with the struggle those students go through to obtain an education," said Cogar, who met his wife in 1984 at a Toronto meeting of the American Psychological Association.

During his doctoral and post-doctoral studies at the University of Michigan, Cogar's focus returned to veterans. "I had a lot of friends who were Vietnam vets," said Cogar. "I became attuned to their issues and challenges." Assignments at the Veterans Administration Medical Center in Ann Arbor eventually led to a 1986 research study on the identification and

treatment of female Vietnam veterans with post traumatic stress disorder. This was the first of three studies he conducted with his wife, a professor of psychiatry at the Medical University of South Carolina.

The study found that, although the number of female Vietnam veterans was relatively small – primarily nurses – they had a much higher incidence of post traumatic stress disorder than their male counterparts.

“Female vets were exposed to the trauma of combat casualties and also had to deal with sexual harassment and discrimination,” said Cogar. “One can only imagine what that must have been like.”

The study recommended implementing a special Veterans Administration program to treat female veterans, which would include more female psychiatrists and psychologists.

Researching the plight of female veterans also uncovered the compatible working styles of Cogar and his wife. “She’s a brilliant psychologist and academic, and a marvelous writer,” said Cogar. “I learned a lot working with her.”

“George is the idea person,” added Shaw. “He has lots of vision and an intuitive sense of people’s experience. I’m better at the details.”

Their compatibility led to an additional research study in 1997 on another subject with special significance for Cogar: spinal surgery. By this time, Cogar had moved from Michigan to South Carolina. The decision to leave his home state was made easier by a weekend trip to visit his future wife where he experienced a 100 degree differential in one day – from 80 degrees in Charleston, S.C. to minus 20 degrees in Kalamazoo, Mich. He packed his bags after obtaining a transfer to the Veterans Administration Medical Center in Charleston, S.C., where he became the supervisory psychologist for the center’s post traumatic stress disorder program.

Cogar and Shaw’s second collaboration was conducted at the Carolina Spine Institute, where Cogar was director of behavioral medicine. The study looked at the effects of psychological trauma and pain management – two areas of keen interest for Cogar – on patients’ spinal surgery outcome. Analysis of the results showed that patients who had suffered childhood trauma, were depressed or suffered from some other psychological disorder fared worse after surgery.

“Many times psychological factors combine with back problems,” said Cogar. “If you’re already depressed and you hurt your back, it’s much harder to recover.”

Rather than the traditional treatment with narcotics, the study recommended cognitive therapy and anti-depressant medications to help patients return to normal functioning as soon as possible. Cogar said it is now common practice to treat depression and other psychological disorders before surgery.

After 10 years with the Veterans Administration, Cogar followed his entrepreneurial bent. He and a partner founded Behavioral Associates of the Carolinas, a multi-specialty group where patients benefited from his empathetic nature.

“He’s incredibly warm and intuitive,” said Shaw. “He puts people at ease and makes it easy for them to open up.”

One of his most memorable patients was Sally, a woman in her seventies who was one of General Electric’s first female engineers. When it became unsafe for her to drive, Cogar began seeing Sally and her beloved dog Henry at home. It was love at first sight between Cogar and Henry, a black lab mix with a gray beard. So when Sally asked him to take care of Henry when she was gone, the answer was easy. Henry has now been a furry member of the Cogar household for six years.

“He’s one of the best things that ever happened to me. He’s 60 pounds of pure love,” said Cogar. “Sometimes in the process of giving we receive our greatest gift.”

In his private practice, Cogar continued to be involved in veterans' matters, providing expert court testimony in post traumatic stress disorder cases. As part of the legal team, he looked into the background of veterans on death row to search for evidence of childhood psychological trauma, hoping to get their sentence reduced to life in prison.

"We'd show the court that there were other reasons the crime was committed," said Cogar. "Not excuses, just an explanation."

A particularly distressing case involved a Vietnam veteran in prison for murder. Cogar argued that the veteran had suffered an abusive childhood, had less than average intelligence and had seen horrendous combat. Despite everyone's best efforts, the veteran became the first person executed in South Carolina after a 10 year moratorium on the death penalty.

Now retired from active practice, Cogar devotes his time to more upbeat pursuits. As a clinical faculty member in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at the Medical University of South Carolina, he occasionally teaches a class on basic behavioral sciences to freshman medical students.

He also enjoys his role on the admissions committee for the university's College of Medicine, where he interviews bright, young students vying to be one of the 150 students accepted into the program each year.

"I wish I had another 50 just like him," said Wanda Taylor, director of admissions for the College of Medicine. "He's so generous, kind and willing to help."

Cogar and his wife have also endowed a large scholarship fund at the Medical University of South Carolina for underprivileged medical students who will make a commitment to practice medicine in rural or underserved areas of South Carolina.

"Their gift is one of our most significant scholarship endowments," said Terry Stanley, associate dean of development for the university.

Cogar and Shaw have indulged their passion for history by restoring four historic homes, two of which have appeared in Traditional Home magazine.

And, of course, Cogar can often be found in the company of his dog, Henry. "He and I have more time now to hang out as buddies," he joked.

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