

**Voices of Protest Oral History Project (EVOP)**

**Butch Chaves (Air Force Veteran, Vietnam War)  
Narrator**

**Brandy Gomez  
Interviewer**

**Part Two of Two Part Interview**

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**Colorado State University-Pueblo  
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**B.C.:** I got in a couple of fights. I know it's not very professional, but I did. I got pretty angry so I ended up basically working by myself, being alone. That's pretty much what I did. I just worked by myself, and then I went into the appraisal business and did that, had my own office all to myself which was perfect, just me and me.

**Interviewer:** Were you like that before you went to work? Were you a more to yourself person or did it just [inaudible]?

**B.C.:** When I worked at Martin Marietta, a lot of guys would all get together at lunch time and play cards, play hearts, eat lunch, and joke around, and I would go by myself. For some reason, I like to put it this way, and maybe I shouldn't now, but a Vietnam vet can tell who another Vietnam vet is. We just can and I can tell and I would approach that individual, and find out that he was and we would just become good friends. We would talk to each other about our experiences and if somebody would come in that we knew that wasn't a veteran we would just change the subject.

**Interviewer:** So, these organizations that you have with other veterans, is it helpful for you? Does it help give you some release?

**B.C.:** Yeah, it does. It's a strong therapy for me. It's my passion, yet it's a trigger. There are times I can come home after doing something and I do feel good about what I just did or what I'm doing but it'll cause flashbacks or nightmares. Trying to recognize them is difficult.

They have a seven week PTSD residential rehabilitation treatment program up in Denver. It's a lockdown program. I went through that. It's a very intense therapy where they teach you exactly what is going on with you, with what you're doing. The thing about it is, when I was there, there was 19 patients. I thought it'd all be Vietnam vets but it isn't. It's a mixture of Vietnam, Iraq and Afghan veterans. You just wouldn't think a 60 year old man would get along with a 20 year old kid, but we did. It was a very good experience for all. One of the programs that I thought was going to be the most boring turned out to be the catalyst for me to really realize what was going on - the biology of PTSD and exactly what's going on in the brain.

**Interviewer:** So you got to see exactly what you were experiencing?

**B.C.:** Yes, some doctors feel that basic training for the Army and the Marines really sets you up for trauma. That's what they do. They teach you how to handle trauma. They want you to be able to survive. They'll tell you in basic training, if you're going into combat, that ten percent of you will die. But they want [you] to be able to act and react, as quickly as possible in combat. I didn't think I got that kind of training, but I did. I knew what to do if we got hit. I did my job. I did it. I think I did it well. It's just something that, now I'm learning that the Army does to an individual in basic training. So they're setting you up for PTSD.

**Interviewer:** So most everyone would experience it.

**B.C.:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** Would you say that that program helped you greatly?

**B.C.:** At first during the program, everybody has the same feeling. You hate to go through that door because you know it's going to be locked behind you. The first thing they do is search you completely, for weapons, contraband, marijuana, that kind of thing, drugs, and your belongings that you take. Then you get to meet everybody and you start feeling a little comfortable. The first two weeks is tough because they tear you down. They want you to remember things. They want you to go into a flashback. And the reason is so that they can develop a specialized treatment plan for you specifically, based on what you've gone through and what's going on. So those first two weeks were very exhausting and tough. There were two or three guys that went in when I did, that left the program within those two weeks. They just walked out, never came back.

**Interviewer:** Cause it was such a hard experience, to experience everything else all over again.

**B.C.:** Yeah, I wanted to leave, but I knew if I left, it may be years before I had another chance. I said I'm tired of this. I want to get better.

**Interviewer:** Start your life over again?

**B.C.:** Yeah. What's left of it.

**Interviewer:** You said you do have children?

**B.C.:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** How many do you have?

**B.C.:** I have two - my daughter's 40 years old, my son is 38.

**Interviewer:** How are they in this experience? Do they help you?

**B.C.:** Well, we've been very distant all of our lives. I mean, I was a strict father. I like to say that my daughter is the cause of all these gray hairs. She was like her dad. She was pretty wild. While she

was going through her high school years, I just wanted to make sure she didn't get in with the wrong crowd. She remembers me as being very strict and didn't like me. I mean, she loved me, but she didn't like me. My son, on the other hand, was more of a momma's boy, and was a good kid and they both turned out great, no problems. But, for example, in my appraisal business, my son would help me. While he was going to college to get his RN degree, he would go along with me. We would travel to Trinidad to do an appraisal, or to La Junta, or to Canon City, and there was nothing to talk about. We had nothing in common it would seem; we never said two words to each other sometimes. It's not that there was any anger or anything between us. He knew what to do when we got there, because I taught him. The nice thing about the PTSD program is they give you a book for your family members, whoever you want to give it to, and it's about PTSD. It's broken down in laymen's terms. You give that to your family, while you're in the program, for them to read. Both my daughter and my son said - this book is all about you. They read it and they said - this is my dad.

**Interviewer:** They probably gained a better understanding of what you were going through.

**B.C.:** They gained a better understanding. While I was in the program, you're able to call out. So I started talking to them on the telephone. My daughter especially, there's a lot of unfinished business between her and I. I was able to call her and say I'm sorry I was the way I was. She says "now I know why."

**Interviewer:** I think it's great that that program offered some kind of item for the family members so that they can understand you better.

**B.C.:** Yeah, the V.A.'s goal is to include the families, that's for sure. In the program I got to the last three weeks, {and} I did not want to leave that place. I said, I could stay here the rest of my life. It was so comfortable, so safe, and they treated us so well. I mean, you have a breakdown, and they're there, and are able to help you. They're able to pull you through, and tell you exactly what happened at that moment, and take you back to what they're teaching you. Sometimes you just don't want to leave. They're doing some wonderful things for the military now. It's just amazing.

**Interviewer:** It sounds like a wonderful program.

**B.C.:** It is.

**Interviewer:** I'm glad it helped you get through everything that you experienced. Now, are there any life lessons that you learned from your service?

**B.C.:** Oh, boy. Yeah, I guess so; it did prepare me for adulthood. I tease my daughter; she's forty going on 10, because she still likes to have a good time. It taught me how to be a man, I think. It taught me discipline. 90 percent of your veterans, you will find, are workaholics. It just gives you something to do, because in the idle time you start thinking. There's not a day that goes by I don't think about Vietnam. And here, especially in the last three weeks it's been tough, the [Vietnam] wall being here [at CSU-Pueblo]. We rode out to meet it, and escort it into town. It's been tough, real tough.

**Interviewer:** Very emotional few weeks.

**B.C.:** Very emotional, very. Had a couple of flashbacks but I knew how to deal with it. I came once in the day, and I just saw too many of my old friends. It was good to come and see them and talk to them. I came twice at 3 in the morning to be by myself.

**Interviewer:** It's kind of nice to have a tribute to...

**B.C.:** Oh, yeah.

**Interviewer:** ...all the lives lost and all the lives that are still here, but had to go through all the same experiences also.

**B.C.:** One of the things you had asked earlier, and one of the things besides anger is guilt. I feel guilty that my name wasn't on that wall. For all these years I just thought, I should be. I don't know, was it my fault because I went the easy [way] and went to the Air Force as opposed to the Army or Marines? That kind of thing. I've learned over the years, all those names on that, I still mourn for them all. I still cry for them all, but I do know this, they would not want me to do that. [Emotional] They didn't die for me to mourn. They died for us to live, have children like you and go on with our lives, and freedom. To think otherwise, is not contrary to what we learned in the service, the discipline. It's what upsets me when everybody feels the same. War, I don't think we should ever go to war. That war should end right now. Pull those guys back, bring them back. But I'm very proud of America to see that they've changed, and are welcoming them home like they should, the way they do. But when I see that on TV, when 3400 come home from Afghanistan and Iraq, I'm happy to see but it still tears me up a little bit, that we didn't get that. So, only a Vietnam vet could understand that, I think.

**Interviewer:** After all you've been through, we're thankful that you're here today to tell your story. You also helped tell the stories of your lost comrades which, like the wall, carries on their names. You also, help carry on their names, and you help give us the education on what happened in combat. I want to thank you for having this interview with us. It's been very educational. People can now look at this to see what people experienced in war. Thank you so much.

**B.C.:** Thank you very much.