

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
THOMAS DEITS
Infantry, Army, Vietnam War

2007

OH
1139

**OH
1139**

Deits, Thomas R. (b.1946). Oral History Interview, 2007.

Approximate length: 1 hour 11 minutes

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

In this oral history interview, Thomas Deits discusses his experiences with the Madison Vets Center, the beginnings of the Vets Center in the mid-1970s, its evolution over time, and his good and bad experiences with clients. Deits began his veterans counseling work with Vets House in 1974, and he discusses the creation of the Madison Vets Center around 1979 and his move to the Vets Center in the early 1980s. He talks about his experiences with clients over the years, and touches on the differences between counseling Vietnam veterans and recent Iraq War veterans. He also provides some insight to how federal regulation has affected the Vets Center.

Biographical Sketch:

Deits (b.1946) served in Charlie Company, 2nd Infantry, 4th Platoon during the Vietnam War. He returned to the University of Wisconsin when he was discharged and then worked for the Madison Vets Center.

Interviewed by Jim Kurtz, 2007.

Transcribed by Casey Rogers, 2013.

Reviewed by Jennifer Kick, 2016.

Abstract by Jennifer Kick, 2016.

Interview Transcript:

[First 10 seconds skipped, start actual interview]

KURTZ: It's November 27, 2007, my name is Jim Kurtz and I'm in the bowels of the Wisconsin Veteran's Museum, interviewing Tom Deits, who we previously interviewed about his Vietnam experiences on the 23rd of November, ah, ah, 2004. But just so we put in context what we're doing here today, we're gonna be talking about Tom's experiences with the Vets Center, the Madison Vets Center, and a little bit about that, but Tom could you tell us what years you were in the military service?

DEITS: Uh, 1968-1970.

KURTZ: --and—

DEITS: --September 1968 through, um, August 1970.

KURTZ: And when were you in Vietnam?

DEITS: I was in Vietnam um, March 2nd through April 8th, no April 6th, 1969-70, so I came home with the colors of the 1st Infantry Division.

KURTZ: And that has all been described in your previous interview, so we won't talk about that today, tell us what the Madison Vets Center is and when it was created and how.

DEITS: Mokay. So there's gonna be a, there's gonna be a preceding chapter to the Madison Vets Center and I will, I'll take it backwards—

KURTZ: Okay.

DEITS: --and we'll go through —

KURTZ: Great.

DEITS: —to the Vets House actually. So the, you know, the—what everybody needs to know is of course, the unrest after the war was just as uh, palatable in places like Madison, Wisconsin as it was during the war, so the aftermath of the war is always as critical as the actual fighting in itself. How do you accept the soldiers? How do the soldiers accept society? Where do they fit? How do they fit back in? And where in the structure are they gonna go? After World War Two, most of them, or many of them, if they were here in Madison they were in on campus. They were in these little trailers, and they were at Camp Randall, and they were stuffed in here, but at least they found an outlet for their energy and their adventure

and they went back to school, and they took tests, and they became middle class citizens. That wasn't the same as my generation or your generation, what happened to us is, is uh, you know school was already in our forefront, you could get a deferment not to go to war during the, Vietnam, so a lot of people got those deferments and either you went to school or you didn't. So if you already went to school, then you probably became an officer or went to OCS or you did something like that, but if you didn't go to school, it was a hard sell to bring back veterans after the war and say "Lets go--, let's put ya in school." There was this, crustiness to that whole experience that, you know, that, that--kind of predates coming back here, is who wants to go to school. So the GI Bill was underutilized. There was a GI Bill after Vietnam, but it's very under-utilized compared to other wars, or particularly World War Two. So where do we start to find Veterans? Well, we find, found veterans in bars, we found veterans in prison, or jail. We found veterans in antisocial uh, you know, demonstrations, we found them on the outside of society rather on the inside, trying to get in. There are people, and this starts here on campus, but it also goes around the country a little bit at a time, San José, California, New York, Brooklyn, those places, Florida. Groups of veterans start coming back and some of them were lead by Vietnam Veterans Against the War, some were lead by Veterans for Peace, some were lead by, ah, you know, um, there wasn't any Vietnam Veterans of America at that time, so then, they were just these loose groups of people who got together. Here in Madison, it was—

KURTZ: Tom, I just wanted to ask a question here, did they get involved in the mainline veteran's groups?

DEITS: Absolutely not. Two reasons is, one is, is that mainline veteran's groups didn't seem to have the doors open. You know, there, the doors seem to be all set, and, and I, I think there's all kinds of labels put on Vietnam Veterans by other people, but I think real label that hurt and stuck was "loser." I don't think it's "baby killer" that matters, I don't think it's any of those great, magnificent, you know, painful ones, I think it's just a simple, "these are, these are society's losers." And they came back and start growing their hair long and they didn't fit into the, you know, they, they were--outside the structure again, but just by the way they looked in many ways. So yeah, they didn't go into the VFWs, American Legions, they didn't go to the, didn't go into the VA hospitals. That's how outside the system they were. And then when they went to the VA hospitals, there didn't seem to be any type of acceptance that these problems they were having were actual combat-related or war-related problems. It seemed to be that, it was labeled, these were personality disorders, these were ah, bad, bad behavioral things, these were, um, drug and alcohol problems more so attributed to, you know, a lack of self-respect and self-will than just going through a problem and, and trying to run from it or trying to

hide from it, or trying to get over it. It, they didn't see self medication as medication, they saw it as self abuse. Alright, so then you get people that're coming back and they're in, there are a few at the University of Wisconsin, there's a place called Vets Info Center, or Vets for Vets on campus, and basically it was to help you make sure if you're taking the GI Bill, you're getting your full benefit and you knew how to use it properly, it was really kind of a structural thing. Well those structural things led to these, quote, "After hours rap sessions." Often beer was involved. Pizza was involved, but often it was, uh, lettin' go of some steam, and lettin' go of--some sense of despondency, depression, despair, all of those things. And out of those meetings, and these are the original rap groups, and this is, your talking 1973, 1974. Part of it triggered, of course by the absolute failure of Vietnam, leaving Vietnam, that, that was a triggering event. And the Vets for Vets people got together and said "Well, let's do something offensive rather than reactive." And what they did then is, is they went, we, you know, the group went together and these, they'd established something called Vets House, here in town. Vets House Inc.

KURTZ: This was a government organization?

DEITS: Well this is, no, this is kind of, this is the rap group expanded. This is guys saying "We're gonna help our own vets. We're gonna help our brothers, we're gonna help our sisters, we're gonna, we're gonna do this ourselves."

KURTZ: Okay.

DEITS: Who's got all the money in our society? Government. So what do you do? Uh, you know, how do you get money to help be self, be a self-help group. Well, this group went through the Red Cross, the Red Cross went through United Way, United Way sponsored the group so they got a small little seed grant to see if they could help the vets, 'cause there started to be a national and, you know here in Madison, a consciousness about what're, what's happening to our veterans? If they didn't get killed or wounded in Vietnam, and they're coming back, and they're still dysfunctional, are they not still casualties? You know, where does the war end and the, for the veteran, for the soldier, where does it end? And so United Way was the first supporting agency, and then, we hired people to write grants, and we got CEDA money from the Department of Labor to help people find grants, and then we got money from uh, and me, I'm a second generation in that, I was not--I was not one of the people that wrote out the letters of incorporation and drafted all that. I'm one of the guys that they hired at the second level, which was actually doin' the work. So I was hired in 1974 to be a Prison Counselor and a Discharge Review Counselor. One of those huge, I, I'd been in law school for a year and a half, as my previous interview tells you. Unlike you, Mr. Kurtz, I didn't have the best of times there. [Both laugh] I didn't have the worst of times either! But I didn't

have the best of times. So, you know, and that's always one of those speculative things – what if I'd have stayed there? Well nothing would have happened the way it's happened, so I, anyway, the way this all goes is then I became sort of their uh, legal eagle in a strange way, on Discharge Review. I mean I, I'd had the experience strangely enough at Fort Riley when I came back with the colors of the First Division. Eventually, um, I was transferred to the Special Processing Detachment, and I interviewed people that had broken the military law. They were either deserters, or AWOLs, or had some other problem, so I'd already gone through the process of how, from the inside, of how you get a bad discharge in the military and how little or how much it takes and, and so I understood the system from having seen it operate, and, you know, and my opinion was it was really loaded against African Americans. Um, it was really loaded against them, they were not gonna get a break. Some other people would get breaks, but not, not the African American society, just wasn't gonna get it from the military. And strangely enough, there weren't many African Americans in Madison at that time either, so we weren't dealing with, with an African American culture, basically, we were dealing with a mostly white culture still. But we were doing discharge review 'cause out of the military came about half a million bad discharges in the late '60s or '70s.

KURTZ: So you were reviewing bad discharges?

DEITS: Right. That's what, that was my forte when I came aboard.

KURTZ: Okay, okay.

DEITS: So that's what I was doing, was sort of a paralegal, if you will. Not a legal legal, like you, not a legal—

KURTZ: We would have turned you in if you would! [both laugh]

DEITS: That was you! [more laughter]. You know, and then from there, uh, and that, that was a, this is a very, unusually structured organization because the director was, was actually elected for one year, and then you got out of office, so it was like a, you know—

KURTZ: Term limit?

DEITS: Term limit! Yes, we had term limits immediately. And we had a board of coordinators. We had a board of directors, and one of the things that always happened in Vets House, is you always had a meeting going on of some, some, some group of people were always meeting. You know, and that meeting was really trying to resolve who's in charge. Who's the authority figure here? And a lot of that was that pent up emotion about

who the hell was in charge in Vietnam, and if they're gonna, you know, if they're gonna operate this way or that way, and you can't have a voice against them, well we just carried that over to the seventies and that, we had a voice against everything, you know, because if the Board of Coordinators did this, the Board of Directors didn't like it, and then, you know, there's always this, this kind of, solving and anger management problem that was going on.

KURTZ: Did the clients have a vote in all of this too? Or was it just the employees?

DEITS: Just the employees. So we tried to get rid of the, the anger management issues from the employee point of view, and then we try to turn it into, uh, really directed to help the vets, you know. And, and--before 1974-75, we had no such thing as post traumatic stress disorder to work with or work around. We had something called Post-Vietnam Syndrome that was the, that was brought together by lots of different people, but it wasn't official. There was never a sanctioned diagnosis, it was just "What's wrong with these assholes?" You know, kind of thing, and, and it's called Post-Vietnam Syndrome. And I believe it had sort of a, a really deep root that drove all these little agencies forward. And one of those things, this is the way I've come to understand it, is that when the massacre occurred in, in My Lai, you know, 1969, we, were, we think from our point of view Tet 1968 changed the war and we lost it there in some ways, I think we lost it in 1969 in the village. When you, when, when our American troops say "This is the only enemy we can find, and it's kids, and, but they're here. And we can see these people, and we're taking 'em out, because this is the enemy." Um, I think we lose tremendously the moral high ground. And that, you know, is like Velcro, it sticks to all, all of us. So it's certainly [??] Vietnam, in a strange way. And so how do we get rid of that? And here's the interesting part to me, now, you know, most people that'll listen to this have been in the military. It was in the military in Vietnam, this is just my experience, is most of the people I would deal with that kind of ethical, moral question would go on the side of "it was okay." Had to be done or, or, it was not okay okay, but it was okay. The truth was, it wasn't okay. It was not the thing we should have done there. We had lost it, you know, by that, that point in time our soldiers had lost the values. Part of what we tried to do when we came back was say, you know it's not, "We are the recipients of having lost the values," but it's the country that really lost them. We were just there, I mean the country lost their value. And where do you get that voice? Where do you get that, you know, that strong voice? Well, we can go back and forward on that, and say well look, um, you know, who will listen to us to say "The issue is bigger than we think, but we're gonna take it on in limited amounts," 'cause if we stopped, we'd ground everything to a halt in this country, and said "We're gonna pay attention to this one Nuremberg Trial if you will. This one thing we did." This country would still be ground to a halt, you know. So it went on

individually by soldiers, by soldier, and I think what happens then, and this is, again, my, contorted view of it, is we didn't make it a systems issue or we didn't make it a military issue, we made it a personal soldier issue. So personal soldiers came back feeling guilty. Personal soldiers came back feeling unclean.

KURTZ: You're saying that's the origin of the Vet House movement?

DEITS: Right.

KURTZ: Okay, go ahead.

DEITS: Right. And once that happens, and we have veterans coming to see us, and not going to see the VA hospitals, and we have veterans coming to us and saying "Look, we will talk with you but not them. We will, we will join your ranks but not, not--the ranks of the VFWs." Then these little pock-marked places like Vets House become threatening! They become dangerous. Because we have a moral truth that no one else has. I mean, that's at least that's the way I view it. And it's not that these guys are so crazy. It's not that they're so disillusioned by the whole life. It is simply they saw what went on, and they know what went on. They were actual--participants. Everybody else is sort of a--you know, a voyeur to the experience. Okay, so where do, where do the actual participants go, they go to a place called Vets House. Now, Congress starts hearing all this, and you know how Congress is, they have a hearing on everything, right? Okay, so I mean, what happened originally when we came back from Vietnam was we had Watergate. Watergate took I don't know how many months to resolve, but nothing else ever made the news, but John Dean, and his wife, and the president, and you know, those guys. So all of a sudden, that, and that's sort of Nixon's um--you know, being defrocked. And I think it's really over the Vietnam experience, not really over Watergate, you know, I think it's really part of that. And so, so what happens is all of a sudden veterans have a voice and they start using it, and Congress starts paying attention, then that's when congress goes and says "Jeez, we better do something really constructive, we better do something big about this. This is a bigger issue than we've ever given it any kind of credence. It's comin' out of the woodwork, we got it everywhere. And if we don't pay attention to it, we're gonna lose that generation totally." Or, quite a bit of that generation. So they put together, in 1979, they put together legislation to create Vets Centers.

KURTZ: And did that really change the Vets Centers? I mean, the Vets Houses?

DEITS: Oh, that's a great question, because the answer is, I think, both yes and no. For some, you know, for some of us who are on the, always on that threadbare living arrangement where the rugs are always worn out and

you, and you never could take your wife out to dinner, God the-- government comes in with money! I mean they pay you! They give you health insurance, and they, so they, solidify, you know, employment for a lot of us that were doing this job and we were pretty grateful about that. That was a big deal. But with government always comes strings attached. So then they started telling us, is, you know, how we could do the job or what we should do with the job and, and so there's, there's—

KURTZ: So they started having manuals about how you're supposed to deal with different situations?

DEITS: That's correct. Absolutely. It became a manualized, institutional, regimented, uh, by the numbers kind of, you know, it took a while to do that 'cause they hired most of the original Vets House and, ah, you know, Flower of the Dragon people, and other people like that. They--took us out of uh—um--out of the ranks of— but--so they didn't hire en masse because actually in Madison, Vets House continued on. Vets House still had a--you know, without me, I was gone out of there, they were talking about Vets House probably went on until about 1990. I was gone in 1980, '81.

KURTZ: Was it continued to be paid by the United Way in Madison, or, how was it funded?

DEITS: Through the Veterans Trust Fund right here at the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs.

KURTZ: Oh, okay.

DEITS: They paid them specifically to do certain ah, you know, prison outreach was the major--they had a jobs program. Every year they had to go to the board and get money, and request it, and then eventually what happens is the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs takes over Vets House. So it's been taken over basically twice. Once by the federal government and once by the State government. And you have some of the old Vets House employees right here at the museum—

KURTZ: Okay.

DEITS: There's two or three of 'em right upstairs. And we all lose sort of our-- autonomy by doing what we did, you know, by going into the system, deeper and deeper.

KURTZ: Did it affect--did it take a while to affect the clients that you were dealing with? I mean, did they know this, or sense this, or—?

DEITS: That's a particularly astute, and working question 'cause it's, it's hard to know what a client sees. But as you and I, you know, as you know, is, you've dealt with lots and lots of people. As they walk in the door they're eyeballing you and trying to figure out which side of the, do you fall on. Now, I will tell you this, this is the way I think it's, it's gotten for the most part: it's probably since Vietnam and maybe before in every war, that we always come home with an enemy. And that enemy is either the Japanese, or the Germans, or--sometimes maybe it's Douglas McArthur coming home and it's the President of the United States, or, there's some enemy we have. Is that enemy inside of us or outside of us? For a lot of veterans, that enemy--they never recognize it as being inside of them. You know, they never recognize that it's actually their experience that creates the enemy, it's not how the government treated them; that's a secondary enemy, in strange ways. The primary enemy is what did you have to do and when did you do it. And so they walk in with that kind of a head on a swivel – "Is this guy gonna make me tell him what I'm really about?" I will tell you this: mostly my experiences, government people don't want you to do that. Vets House people, we did want you to do that. We wanted you to 'fess up. We wanted you to stand in front of me and say, "Look, this is what I did." It would stay in the room, it would be private information, it would not be a part of the bigger--but any time you go into the, the system now, everything's recorded.

KURTZ: By recorded, by recording like we're doing this now or by, uh, reports?

DEITS: Reports. Clinical notes, so if you tell me you're a mass murderer and you took eight lives, I probably can't put that in there, I'm not gonna put that in the note, but I'm gonna make a note – 'Has anti-social personality disorder [Kurtz laughs] that came out many ways, many times, and oughta be in prison' you know, okay. So that'll be, that'll be a clinical record as to--and the government's always recording what it does.

KURTZ: Mhmm.

DEITS: You know, so it does affect how a client sees that, sees you as, 'what's your role? Who are you lining up with? Is your higher power mine, or the government, 'cause they pay me.' And the answer to that is – it's likely, I had to respond eighty percent to that government body and twenty percent to the client. Used to be the opposite. At Vets House, it was eighty percent the client, twenty percent the—

KURTZ: Do you think it makes a difference that you were a Vietnam veteran yourself and lived some of the issues that you talked about? You know, gives you empathy, that a person that didn't have this?

DEITS: What I think is true, and I think there's two buttons, you know there's more, there's buttons in our head, and one is, is that I don't think--in other words I think that what I started by going in the military in 1968 is, I'm still in that military, it's the same military, and so are these guys I see. It's just that the VA Hospital has the colonels now, or Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs has those colonels. Yeah, so I can, I see the big picture, that, who's, who's moving these veterans around is very helpful for me to, to be able to say to them "Yes," uh, you know, "the VA wants you to take anti-depressants." And there's a reason they want you to take antidepressants. They want to calm you down, or lift you up, they don't want you to commit suicide because it looks bad on their record. So, it's still a part of what looks bad. Now —

KURTZ: Mhmm.

DEITS: —my, for instance, to this person is, is, but it doesn't matter if you make the government feel bad. What really matters is who cares about you and who do you care about? 'What's your mission in life?' is not a government mission anymore. I mean I, I could separate those out pretty well for vets, and they know I'm talking you know, from the field, to the rear, to the casualty lines. You know, I can do that. I mean, I think it's very helpful to have been on, in Vietnam, on the ground.

KURTZ: But let me ask you this because I assume today you're seeing people back from Iraq, do you find that you can't have the same empathy you, with an Iraq veteran, that you have with a Vietnam veteran, because your experiences are different? Or not different?

DEITS: Well--ah, there's always, you know, ah, there's always a separation of some sorts in generations. There's a separation in ah--experience, there's a separation in, you know, globalization of what's going on and, it's, it's hard not to, but I think this is the important part of what we do, or we try to do. It's hard for me to sit back and say, "Is this what you said, this is not Vietnam, so please tell me your experience." Rather than, I can fast forward and say "I know what you're feeling." You know, no one ever knows what anybody else is feeling, it's hard enough for that person to feel it. So I, I think what happens is--is, and for example, these are National Guard and Reserve Units in Wisconsin quite a bit, and they got all these titles, it's not the 1st Infantry Division, it's the 1147th Transportation with, uh, you know, and they're here, and they're there, and there's so much to learn just about what they did and what the experience and what their daily mission was, is, is you really have to pay attention to what's going on, and then you have to pay attention to the structure they had, and the big difference is they come back to that, with that structure. People, most of our veterans came back, I mean, and just trickled back into society. They're coming back with unit structures, still.

So they're not individualized yet. At some point, the big trick for these guys is, can they get out of that, that structure after, some are gonna stay twenty years. Can they individualize themselves after twenty years in the military? That's really a, a tremendously difficult thing to do. So it's, it is different. And you have to listen differently and you have to pay attention differently, but the empathy is the same.

KURTZ: Mokay.

DEITS: It's a hard war.

KURTZ: Now, did you, when you talk about the people you talk to, the veterans you talk to, did you find there was a difference between the veterans that just came back and got dumped into society, or those that continued to have an obligation for six months, or a year, or stayed in a little bit longer after Vietnam? Is there any difference between those people?

DEITS: I, I didn't see, you know, I didn't see much difference in those people, because the people that came back and had to do stateside duty generally didn't do it very well. They actually got in more trouble that way. I mean the military had a, had a program after, 'bout '68, where you could get out 150 days early, and it was a smart program, um, it didn't get you any debriefing, and it didn't get you any slow way back in to society, but it, what it didn't do also was it didn't get you in trouble. That's what a lot of the, the discharges, the less honorable discharges, they didn't come out of Vietnam, they came out of the stateside military or the German, in Germany, basically. There were very few that came out of Vietnam itself. So it was that period of time when you had to, you know, adjust to the military, you're always adjusting to the military too, by the way. You know. So the military in Vietnam was fairly lax, many times. The military stateside, or back here, was trying to—

KURTZ: Have those less-than-honorable discharges been treated differently historically after, I mean, you said, you know, I mean, that's a pretty dramatic statistic. That these are all stateside or peacetime or non-Vietnam related. I mean--has there been a way for these people to get these upgraded, to get some help, or—?

DEITS: Early on there was a lot of upgrades that came because there was a lot of violation of due process. There was just a lot of bringing people in and saying, "Hey Kurtz, uh, you know, you're having trouble in this unit. You're not doing very well, um, we're not gonna, you know, you've been to Vietnam—" So Vietnam would have played a part of it, 'cause the guys would get, wouldn't listen as well anymore. But what would happen next is they'd say, "Hey, we've got a deal for you. No other attorney, no due process, but we're gonna sign you out of the military." You'd say, "Okay,

well what happens next to me?" you know, "what does this mean?" "Well you're gonna get a less than honorable, or an other than, other than honorable discharge." They don't say 'less than honorable,' they say 'other than honorable.' What's that term 'other' mean? And then there was the, remember they would always be upgraded automatically to a general discharge once you got out. Okay, alright. So the people that wanted to get out of the military, and were given a, an offer to get out, they would just sign off, you know, and they're nineteen or twenty years old, the guy they're talking to is a captain or a major general. He's twen—, he's thirty, thirty one, thirty two, and the system is saying, "You can, you got a--we'll give you a bus ticket home, bud." You know, so, people would get out, and then they'd get back to the society and they'd find out they weren't entitled to unemployment benefits, they weren't entitled to VA benefits, they, that two years or whatever they'd just put in was wasted 'cause there's no benefit to it, it was all--you know, so that--and, originally, the military admitted their mistake in a lot of cases, and there were a lot of upgrades, you know, in the early 70's and into the 80's, then the military got really good at due process, and understanding, you know, and it's not to say everybody in the military obviously, um--you know, it, it's all the military's fault. They're a lot of people that can't function in the military very well. And they are a problem. And they have to get rid of 'em, so.

KURTZ: I'm gonna turn the tape over.

[break in recording][00:28:21]

KURTZ: --off away from the Vet House and Vet Center, talking about some of the clients, maybe we oughta pick up the story about, the Vet Center is now after, uh, the federal government is, started subsidizing them.

DEITS: So that, that takes place in uh, I mean it was very interesting 'cause it, that becomes a very political show. The congressman, or the senators who put it in action were Senator Alan Cranston from California, and Strom Thurmond from South Carolina, and then all the senators all of a sudden started telling their constituents and the congressmen, "Here, we got these Vet Centers," so, somebody like Robert Byrd in, is from West Virginia, they got four Vet Centers in West Virginia, they got two in the state of Wisconsin. First one was in Milwaukee, 'cause Milwaukee is the, you know, the bigger city and had more problems. But Milwaukee basically uh, you know--didn't have as many services as we had originally, in Madison. So it's Madison and Milwaukee have Vet Centers, and then they put 'em, localized them wherever they could, and they expanded it from, I think it was about 160 originally, and now they're at 206, they just added thirty more because of the Iraqi War, one just went in to Escanaba. So they're in, they're in these, ah, you know, every state has at least two. Guam has one, uh, you know, Hawaii has several. And what they try to do

is they try to put these small little units, like patrol units almost, four or five people, they, in an area, and were responsible for it, and the Vets Center in Madison is responsible for about half the state. So that's a pretty, it's 260 miles, and it's 100 miles wide, or whatever, and typically we have huge, huge numbers of veterans in a state who need services or want services. So we can't provide it all, but we can certainly do the contact work. What they really wanted from Vet Centers was we would go out and find the vets. We wouldn't wait for them, we'd be proactive, looking for veterans in trouble.

KURTZ: How did you find vets?

DEITS: Well it was interesting, 'cause we'd get referrals from family, we'd get referrals from county veteran service officers, we've got those all over the state, and they would know the vets on a local, or more localized level. We would do PSAs, we would do you know, lots of different ways to outreach to say to that vet, now you know, "If you're having trouble, we have a place for you to go. And if we can't do it personally, we will get you to the right place."

KURTZ: Was there a conscious decision to make the Vet Centers not look like government buildings?

DEITS: Yes. Absolutely. I always say we were the camouflage part of the, of, of the government. You know, you couldn't tell we were the government. People are just amazed when they say well who do you work for? I'd say, "the federal government, I'm a federal employee," and "no!" We don't dress the same way, I mean blue jeans are just fine most of the time, um, that's all tightened up, quite a bit and, and the biggest, tightest part of this is, is now, in this day and age, they want everybody to be licensed, in some way and some service. Well we still have a lot of people who are just outreach, and I don't mean 'just' outreach workers their, their, really, function is outreach to, they just notify people, so they don't really necessarily have to have a license. But the therapeutic end or the counseling end, um, you know, they want people to be licensed by the State of Wisconsin or the State of Illinois, or—

KURTZ: Is that good or bad?

DEITS: Oh I like that question a lot. [Kurtz laughs] It is both good and bad. So, one is, it does give you some sense, when you're a client, or, that these are people who have gone through social work school, or therapy school, or counseling school, in some sort. The bad news is, is that doesn't make you necessarily a good veterans counselor that you went through a college degree program. In some ways and sometimes in my experience it--tends to do the opposite, it tends to separate you and say 'well, if you'd have just

gone to school, you wouldn't be having these troubles in life.' You know, life is all intellectual, it's all in your head, and if you've got a good grade and you can pass this test, or you can write this paper, that means you're now a good therapist. Ah, I beg to differ, I think uh, you know, I, I go to counselors training all the time. I look at a room and I can tell you who the good counselors are. You could walk in and tell—

KURTZ: Even me?

DEITS: Yes. [Kurtz laughs] Yes! We would all pretty much agree.

KURTZ: Ah, so--the federal government is now running this, does this help the outrea—well I guess you have more resources, that has to help.

DEITS: Right.

KURTZ: Ah, do you have any tools to help people with, I mean like ah, to help out with ah, say, rent, clothes, ah, how do you do that?

DEITS: Ah that, that too is a very good question because those are the basics of how, you know, of--how do you help the least advantaged. So, for example: I see a gentleman, World, um, Korean War veteran in Mt. Ida, Wisconsin. Mt. Ida, as I understand it, pays the least amount of property tax in the state. And I'll tell ya something – this guy's home, he pays about 140-150 dollars. But his entire income is 600 dollars a month. It's a cold winter, food has gone up, gas has gone up, everything except proportionally his salary hasn't gone up, so here's a guy that's, that ah, went through all his life, he's not inner city, and he's not homeless, and he's not got a tin cup on State St., but he's up in his little community and he has not enough money and not enough food and not enough healthcare and not, he just can't get anywhere. So what do you do? Well you go to the county and there's rent assistance, or there's, there's ah, heating assistance for these, somebody like that. There's all kinds of ways to help them at that level, they put in insulation in his home, but it still doesn't make the difference. So one of the ways, I mean a Vet Center like, or a Vet Center Counselor like me, I will find money for people. I don't get it through the government, however. The government does not give, they will not allow, you know, money, they won't say "here, here's 100 dollars a month for ah, to help veterans who are poor." So I have to go to VFWs or I have to go to American Legions, or I have to go, I actually have one guy who ah, anonymously--I happen to know who he is, but he's donated twenty-five dollars a month for forever, and, you know--technically, this is probably getting' me really in trouble, I shouldn't be taking that money and giving it out. But that's what I do.

KURTZ: Mokay.

DEITS: But it has to be really, that's underneath the system. The system does not allow that at the level where I'm, I'm at.

KURTZ: What is the system, I mean obviously, I worked in the government for a long time so I know the system knows this is going on.

DEITS: Yes!

KURTZ: But what, what is their reaction? Just don't tell – is it don't ask, don't tell?

DEITS: That's it! That's it. It's a slippery slope if you know, if everybody finds out that this is going on, then you're in trouble, and blah blah blah, and so—well I see people, and people know this in Madison, is that if they need, if a Vet needs a warm coat or needs to get to Cleveland, Ohio 'cause his mother just died, then we'll send him to me, I mean we'll send 'em to the Vets Center and I will, I will find him a way to get where he's gotta go. I don't think that's ever not happened. Somehow, some way, we will do what has to be done. That's the part I like best is we will problem solve.

KURTZ: Mhmm.

DEITS: We start out with a, with a logo, I mean everybody has sort of a, you know--you know, 1st Division, you know, you know what their, our motto was right?

KURTZ: Yes, “No mission too difficult, no sacrifice too great, duty first.”

DEITS: There you go! Okay, you got it. Alright. Well the Vets Center started it was “Keep the promise.” That's very broad, what the heck's 'the promise' and how do you keep it? You know. The second part was, which made more sense, was “Help without hassles.” So, if you need help, we will find a way to do it, and we won't hassle you about it. You know. Most of the government will hassle you if you need help. Tried not to do that. The unfortunate part is I think now in 2007 there is, there are some hassles that come with the territory. Um--the, you know there's, there's more mandates, there's more electronic rules, about, there's more structure to the, how we keep the records. Some of that is good. Some of that is mandated because we're in the government system and these records are dangerous, you know. One thing that's happened is, is people aren't as dangerous as their records are. Somebody steals the identity, somebody steals the, you know, and we actually know there's a book called *Stolen Valor*. People will actually steal your identity and say “I'm as brave as Kurtz.” And no one's as brave as Kurtz.

KURTZ: [laughs] That's funny. Ah, could you tell us what some of your some of your success stories have been, with dealing with clients?

DEITS: Um—

KURTZ: You don't have to tell names or anything, but just kind of what, what the background was and—

DEITS: Yeah, I mean back to Vets House, it's was absolutely getting somebody Veterans benefits, uh getting the military to say that uh, the whole system was screwed up and getting a discharge upgraded, that happened, uh particularly I'll tell you this uh, you'll never track this, but there was a gentleman who wanted to be the Tribal Chief in one of the local tribes, couldn't do it 'cause he had a less-than-honorable discharge. Once we got it upgraded, he was now chief material, and that eventually happened. So, ah, you gotta have that honor in your life, and any time we can find a, you know, a way to re-present you with honor, and also we want you to take responsibility in your life. So it goes both ways. I'm very, very pleased when it's, when, you know, somebody will say look, you know, a veteran, I've seen who has -- divorced with seven kids, right? Okay. He gets four kids in Madison, Wisconsin he's gotta take care of, and the state that he came from wants money for the three kids he left behind. So, he's actually gotta pay more money to the other state than to take care of these kids here. And we were able to straighten that out so that his kids got the, were equalized, so he could handle both sets of kids, and one set of kids weren't penalized because your [inaudible]. So that's a, kind of a different way to look at it, but um, any time you can equalize the system or the power, and give people back power, and I think, you know, the other thing is, it that, we were talking before, you said you weren't a writer, well I, you know, the finalized thing is, is I got about eight or nine people now writing into this magazine called *The Deadly Writer's Patrol*, and we've been here at the museum and done this, and that's kind of the final arbitrator, uh, you get a voice out in the community. And so I'm proud of that too, I think that's something that, that came through the whole process. But I think the real thing is, is on a daily basis, ah, this is what I'm proudest of is at the Vets Center we will treat you with dignity.

KURTZ: As far as this magazine, is this something that's typical at a Vet Center nationally or this something unique here, that--?

DEITS: Well I think there's only one other Vets Center that I know of that started an actual writing group where you publish something. Now, um—it's you know, sort of like the school model, is, is you write out your bluebooks and here it is, and you get that, so it's not so farfetched that this is just a, the extension of an educational model. What this Vet Hospital is doing really well is art, these days. They have a Vets to Vets program, which is

much like the Vets House I think in a strange way, um, but it's artistic, it's not necessarily writing as much as it is, but it's painting. And that's another way to do this, is any way you can get yourself expressed, so. But yeah, this is fairly unique, um—

KURTZ: By express, could you explain what expressing in, you know, kind of an art, writing and painting are both art forms. How is, is that a rehabilitation for people, or—?

DEITS: Yeah, the way I see it—it's that, you know, in our lifetimes we're gonna have a myriad of experiences and opinions and thoughts and we never concretely get them down to one thing. Maybe when we're watching a football game we say "that's stupid" you know, whatever, we condense it there. But our war experiences, which happen over a year or two years, in some cases four years if you're in World War II, there's so many ideas and thoughts that go on and it's just the range that you can have on those. And once you start writing them they go down into paragraphs and sentences and words. You take one verb and you say "This is what happened on that ambush," or "this is what happened or this is what I experienced." All of a sudden, you've got it contained into a form, if that's not the right word, you can change it, you can edit it, you can say, "No it's not quite right, that's not quite it." So you're working back on, on putting that experience back into a form and a structure. It's sort of like a grenade, when it explodes--you know, it's all over the map. But you can take that all over the map and put it back into the grenade, you know, you've done something.

KURTZ: How do you deal with situations where people can't remember what happened? I mean you know that, you know, you know that they experienced something, you know their DD214 is right, I mean everything computes, but they can't remember what happened, specifically. Is that unusual or—?

DEITS: Yes. Ah, yes and no. I mean, as you and I age, you know, we'll have dementia and we won't remember. I just talked to somebody, I talked to a lawyer here in town today, he's 82 years old, and he's trying to tell me that the VA's taking away his money, I mean his ability to handle his money, and he's arguing with me that he has the ability, he should be able to have the ability to handle that money. So I ask him, well, who was he seeing at the VA that has actually made that decision, 'cause it's not in thin air. And he says, "I—can't remember." So he indicates that he can't remember that person that's making a quality decision about his life. That's why he's not handling his money, 'cause they're saying to him, you know, we don't know what you're going to do with this money 'cause you can't remember names and places. Okay. That's dementia at the end, at the end of our lives, so at, in this part when we get back from Vietnam, or

World War II, or Korea, or Iraq, we have too many memories, we have too vivid of recall, we have too much going on, our plates, the table's filled with thoughts and food and ideas. Somebody says to me they can't remember, so it's, it's either, you know, psychological block, which is possible, but not very likely. So I can, I would, I would ask triggers, I would say "Jim, who did you serve with? You know, do you remember anything about them?" There's always ways to get memory back from the other side of your mind. If you can't at all, then you've got some kind of neurological brain disorder of some sort, and that's a problem with the Iraqi Vets – there's tremendous amount of brain injury. So that's what you have to look out, look for, and say well, Okay. Then you have to build into, then it won't be your personal history, Kurtz, it'll be your unit's history we can go to.

KURTZ: Is that bad, if a person can't re-, I mean, like you were talking, you've got this overload, which obviously can cause a lot of problems, but, you've got a situation where a person knows that they were, you know, had some job, they were a machine gunner, or a squad leader, or something like that, and knows that he was out wandering around in the bush for six weeks or something like that, but can't remember anything that happened other than maybe people shot at him periodically or something like that, and he was either cold, or hungry, or whatever, I mean is that good, bad, or indifferent?

DEITS: What, generally what we want, you know, I wouldn't label it any of those things, but I think what we want is our life experiences to be vivid, and to be rational, and to be powerful, if that's what we're doing. So, you know, let's take it another step forward, you got married to some woman thirty or forty years ago, and the only time you remember the date you married her is the day you married her, you don't remember the anniversaries, is that good or bad?

KURTZ: Bad! [both laugh] Very bad.

DEITS: You got four kids, you can only remember three. Is that good or bad?

KURTZ: [laughs] Yeah, gotcha.

DEITS: If you can't remember an ambush, you know, that's, that's okay, but if you don't remember the people you served with for four or five months, that's not so okay, 'cause that's what gives it all texture. You know, so that gives, that's what gives it all your life, benchmarks, it gives you anchor points, you know, Captain Kurtz, I remember him. You go to reunions and you look at him and say jeez. I'll tell you another, you know, and this is kind of a strange story, is when I was doing ah, discharge review I was also a prison outreach counselor and I did almost every

prison in the state at the time and we've got a lot more since then. I did Oxford Federal Correctional Institution, which was really built by the state and sold to the Feds, and they had a cafeteria and a hotel management line, and they had cooks there, and I'm goin' through the line, I look up, and it's a guy from my unit! He's on the other side.

KURTZ: Oh my [laughs]

DEITS: I remembered him! I remembered his nickname. I remember, you know, and I could also make the quantum leap as to why he might be there, because I had experiences with him. He didn't remember me nearly as well. He did not remember me, and you know, so that's the strange, the stranger part of it is, is some people just won't remember other people because they are the most important person in anything they're doing. That's sometimes why you can't remember. Nobody else is important, you know. So for me, he was important because he nearly got us killed once.

KURTZ: Mhmm, that would be, that would make—

DEITS: Yeah, he wouldn't remember me, because I didn't nearly get him killed.

KURTZ: Well, because I've got a moral compass, being an ex-attorney in all of that, can you describe some of your failures?

DEITS: Sure. Um—yeah, I mean—

KURTZ: Or things that went bad, I mean, I mean that ah—

DEITS: Um—yeah--you know--I would say it this way, is that, there's no person I've ever dealt with that I've reached the way I really wanted to reach them, so everyone goes a little bad, there's nothing, I can never write a story and say this is a perfect scenario, it all worked out the way we anticipated. I got a guy, you know, come home, and he ends up getting on probation. He's from a little town outside of Madison, and his name would, would rhyme with, you know, would sound like anger, kind of, that kind of guy.

KURTZ: Yeah.

DEITS: And he gets in trouble. He's gotta complete anger management with me, to have it a first offenders program. He goes down to the eleventh month out of twelve and he doesn't complete it. He's gotta do six months in jail. Now, what happened? I mean he was, he was within a month, why did it, you know, why did it fall apart and he ends up, and then he ends up getting divorced, then he ends up, you know, being a doofus if you will, in our society. He's out there now, drinking and doing whatever he's doing

and yeah, I didn't, I didn't connect him back to the values, the um--of his family, and his kids and the job. I didn't do it. I mean, not that I had to, but that's particularly what's painful. I mean society is always better off when our soldiers come back and are better off.

KURTZ: Yeah. Have you ever had a, a situation where you felt an obligation to report criminal behavior based on a client? Or what, is there an ethic there, or—?

DEITS: Yeah, I mean the ethic is, I have a personal ethic on that, I mean, but particularly if there's a threat to self, I have to report that, if this person is suicidal, or if he's homicidal, or she's homicidal, I have to report that, so that the person who they're making the threat against is protected. Um, I'll go back to another case that I think ah, you know, which will connect all these dots for you in a strange way. I had a Vietnam veteran that I saw for quite a while, I actually saw him in a mental ward. He was diagnosed with PTSD, I didn't necessarily suspect that that was really the key issue. The key issue was, is um, he had his hand in the cookie jar where he worked. And it was about to come out. He was having an affair. That was about to—

KURTZ: Come out.

DEITS: —come out. Um, he was on the mental ward and they didn't look at his behavior, they looked at his experience in Vietnam and said, "You know, that's why he's, that's why he's aberrant, these are aberrant behaviors." When I talked to him, he was trying to get over everywhere he could. Why, I don't exactly know why he became this kind of sociopath in his belly. I talked with his wife several times, I talked to his psychiatrist, I talked to him, and eventually, like I'm talking to you, we had a straight up conversation about, you know, look – I know you and you know me and this is the way it is. Well, he committed suicide. Um, I think one of the things he was trying to do was trying to convince me. If he could convince me that this was all Vietnam, that it wasn't him, then he'd be okay. You know, he had to convince, I was sort of his moral compass on the issue. And I wouldn't give him that moral leeway. I wouldn't say that you're cheating on your wife because you were in Vietnam thirty years ago. That he killed himself, showed me in fact he could up the ante. He would up the ante to the degree he needed, he was gonna up the ante until he got out of this predicament. So if we, if we get ourselves in a predicament and the system won't let us out of that predicament, it's a predicament.

KURTZ: Yeah. Have you had to deal with any phonies?

DEITS: Yes. Um—

KURTZ: I mean the entry ticket is a DD214 to you, is that the way it's always been?

DEITS: Well the interesting part to me is that the VA never required it at the hospital system, and we always have required it. You know, we always have looked at that as, as the, you know, we've had fraudulent DD214s and people, but we get a lot of itinerant people that say "Well I can't quite get my DD214," or "I only have one form of identification, it's not that form." And then it's often not only the DD214 that, that's not true, it's the story that's not true. So one of the things in life we want to, we want to be able to respond to is this fictional or is this non-fiction, you know. Any of these stories in the Deadly Writers Patrol, are they truly not, non-fiction or is there some fiction. I have never read a story that there isn't some fiction in it.

KURTZ: Sure.

DEITS: Um, 'cause you can't remember everything, so you've gotta fill in the space, right? It's, it's more the principal of it, am I, am I trying to write nonfiction based on myself so that you'll respect and honor me more, or am I doing it because it's a better story that way, or am I doing it because it's, it's just the way I am, you know. Ever dated a woman and you looked, or she dated you, and she looked at you and she said "Yeah, I dunno about this, who's this guy?" [Kurtz laughs] Right? How much of you does your wife think is fiction?

KURTZ: A lot, probably [laughs]

DEITS: Mine too! So it's real tough to say that that DD214, but it's the basis, it'll tell ya when you were in, it'll tell ya, you know, what medals you got, it'll tell ya most of that stuff.

KURTZ: Well do you, uh, 'cause I've interviewed quite a few people that have purported to have Vietnam experience, and I can almost, particularly with infantry people, tell right away whether they're, been there or not. You know, you can, like you say, there's always fiction in stuff like that. Do you find that that's the way you do it too, is, you start figuring out this, because you, you've got the same generation in all of these people, does that, is that how it happens?

DEITS: Yeah. Yeah and I think the object is just have them talk at three sentence levels below where they're at and you'll find out real fast. Yeah. "You know, Jim that confuses me, you said you were with 1st Division and you came over with the colors in 1975," I mean you know, whatever. "It's really confusing, 'cause my knowledge would be, that didn't the colors

come a little before that?" You know. It's interesting 'cause when you raise children, you also get that, you know.

KURTZ: Yeah, oh for sure. That's, I'm gonna do one—

[break in recording][00:53:03]

KURTZ: —again, ah, before we uh, go into the future of this and all of this, what are the, can you make any generalizations about the, the type of people, the different social classes you've seen, I mean you've seen some unusual people like the athletic director of Wisconsin, or something like that, I mean, uh, I mean is there anything you can say about that?

DEITS: Well I saw the, I used to see the old athletic director of Wisconsin, he's not a Vietnam veteran but he used to be our United Way campaign guy.

KURTZ: Oh okay [laughs]

DEITS: I, I would say this, I think most people are startled. I mean I get together a speaker's bureau for a history class at University of Wisconsin and they're startled that most of the people are pretty, Vietnam veterans have lead pretty normal lives, they're fairly intelligent, they're good citizens, um, and they fit in the capacities of uh, lawyers, Indian chiefs, fathers, husbands, and they've done it fairly well. It's always been a, there's, it's a struggle for everybody, but, you know, we're not this, this group of people that just are social misfits, I mean most people are, that I, that talk about these issues have 'em in kind of the right proximity, and that's one of the things we've tried to do is, yes these are painful and they're powerful experiences, but so is losing your kid when he's twelve, or whatever. We, we all have these kinds of things and we should have more empathy for each other, not just for the vet, the Vietnam experience. So we, I have 'em at very top rung; some of the people you know ah, you know, you'd be surprised around this community who's a Vietnam veteran and doing very, very well with that experience. But generally in counseling you see people who are looking for something and need something desperately out of this system. You don't get them coming in just because they're curious. You get them coming in because in fact some part of their life really isn't working. And they're stumped by that, or they're--want a second opinion at least.

KURTZ: Having walked by your office for a lot of years because I work across the street from it, it started out with just one war on the window, and it's gotten many wars on it, unfortunately, do you ever have any sightseers just come in and ask what this is all about?

DEITS: Well we get two parts. A veteran has a, you know, we have people looking for dogs, services for dogs and cats, so we get veterinarian mixed in there [Kurtz laughs] And we often get people who are curious about their relatives or what their relatives might be able to get out of a place called the Vets Center. So, the other part is, the other, the original place was Vets Info Center, on campus, or Vets for Vets. Then it was Vets House, which is this sort of, three story, it's a house, and now it's a center, and now the Vets Center has moved, really as we're talking, is really moving from 147 S. Butler to 706 Williamson St., and I'm not making that move, and one of the reasons is, is they're going from a center to a clinic, in my opinion, it's a clinic. So it's, it's much more of an upper scale, uh, you know, it's, it's going to not appeal as much to lower income, homeless people.

KURTZ: Is it going to look like a doctor's office? Is that what you're saying, or something like--I mean—

DEITS: It's going to look like you're going into a Dean Care facility.

KURTZ: Oh yeah, I gotcha. Which is, very, very different than the one here. I mean it's—

DEITS: Right, right. And for me the quantum leap was, was a little bit too much. I mean that--but I'm also at the point in my life where uh, you know, I was gonna leave the place sometime and this just seems to fit.

KURTZ: Before I let you leave, I gotta ask you the question, is there any group that you've been unwilling, well I mean not unwilling, unable to reach, any group of Vietnam veterans you've been unable to reach?

DEITS: Well there are some groups that are really much harder to reach, that's for sure. You know and I would say this, that the hardest stumbling block is usually drugs or alcohol. 'Cause that drugs or alcohol becomes their higher power, their fanatic way they live, it has its own kind of moral code to it, and there's a whole system that builds around it, and generally it gets in trouble with their relationships and eventually what they say is "to hell with everything else, we'll take the alcohol and the drugs over living." So it's sort of a substitute, if you, if people can balance it, it's not so bad, but often the people we get, you know--these addictions are really tough on the soul. Not so much on the body, I mean, you know they'll take, the soul meaning our ability to be human and empathetic with other people. To me it's like getting' on a bus, you know, and you'll tell the alcoholic on the bus. You will tell that person, he's gonna, generally not be quiet, he's gonna act out, he's gonna be a little bit disturbed, he's gonna have to get up to pee, he's gonna have to do all of this, and that's the person who's really hard to reach. 'Cause what do you reach them with? Sobriety?

KURTZ: Not interested in that.

DEITS: Not interested! Well that's, uh, how about God? God'll get through this? They've given up on that, that's a fantasy to them. How about a relationship with their wife? Well, they, "oh she's divorced" you know, and so that's the group that's really been the hardest to reach. You know, um--and some of that comes right back from, you know, how do we do these things? If you remember having a, you know this is the way my head works, if you go out on your Junior Prom date and you get shitfaced, that's a nice clinical phrase, you know, what's your date going to remember about you?

KURTZ: Probably that you got shitfaced. [Deits laughs] She's not gonna see you again.

DEITS: Yeah, not that you were a good dancer or you were jovial or you were fun to be around or you were a gentleman, she would just remember that when you went out with her you, you weren't out with her. You were out with yourself, you know. Those are the hardest people to reach, we have to be connected to something, and one of the things I really liked about the old Vets House is I don't care who you were, you could connect at a Vets House. You could connect, I mean, 'cause there's no place where you can't connect here, there were no rules that say 'you can't connect here.'

KURTZ: Well, you said in the early days, alcohol was used as some kind of a lubricant.

DEITS: Yep.

KURTZ: Could you describe that just a little bit, about what, what's that all about? I mean, I mean 'cause obviously that's not conventional textbook way of doing things.

DEITS: No, I mean it wasn't used during business hours, so it wasn't an eight-to-five thing, but it was a, you know, eight to four thirty you'd be at work and at five o'clock you'd go next door to one of the bars on Park St. and you'd just hammer out the day, I mean that's how the next two hours would go, or whatever, is you'd be at a bar. It would be, that would be the way we would relieve ourselves of, you know, the experiences we were just having. We wouldn't go running or we wouldn't go um, you know, out for dinner, you know, and so, we had, as an organization, we had to get through that too.

KURTZ: Sure.

DEITS: You know, we had a couple people that, I'll say this very, very unfortunately, we had at least one that died of alcoholism, was a staff member.

KURTZ: Did you ever have people that fought you? I mean, that would keep coming back, but yet, argue with you all the time and, you know, fight what you were trying to do and—

DEITS: There are a minority of people that want to beat you. That's for sure. They won't, if they can beat you, then, you know, then they're reinforcing their view of the world. Yes, absolutely. There was one in the Vets Center today. He keeps coming back, and he's on his third therapist, and he's got the same struc- it's not me by the way – but he's got the same structure in his voice and in his tone, and it's like “nothing works!” You know. Well, yeah, they're gonna beat you to the punch, literally, and if you're five minutes late, they're gonna use that, you know. So they're working on you, not themselves.

KURTZ: And so that becomes kind of their reinforcement is, if I can beat you up, I feel better?

DEITS: Right.

KURTZ: Is that kind of what the deal is?

DEITS: Right. And so what you, what you end up with is I mean there's two ways, I mean a war tells you that you have an enemy and there's someone to kill. That's what a war tells you. We would hope that life would tell you that people can be your friends, and I, you know, if you pick up the paper and there's this guy over on the east side and he's raping people and breaking in their doors, he's not my friend. And I'm not going to treat him like my friend. Police I hope don't treat him like a friend; I hope they find this son-of-a-gun, you know. That's not- but generally speaking, what we wanna do is be able to find friends in the world and make, you know, have the experience of a combat unit without going into combat. A team. The Badgers. Uh, you know the basketball team, particularly, you want that camaraderie, and when a guy like Michael Flowers backs off, and he's not there, you wonder “what happened?” ‘Cause he's got his teammates and they want him there. So there's something that happens and we want to build those teams. And we do get people coming in and saying “I'm not on anybody's team, and I won't be on your team!”

KURTZ: Now you said you're going to retire, is that because you're old and decrepit or is it because you think that the system is going in a different direction and you don't want to be part, I mean, ‘cause you've worked,

I'm not demeaning you, you've worked there for a long time, so you know it's a, I mean it's--where do you see the system going?

DEITS: Um--I see the system going towards, away from local control, which is Vets Center control, to a regional or national control. So I see, very strangely enough, there's this globalization going on in the world that even affects things like Vet Centers. So, there's going to be one structure, one standard, one way we do things, everybody will be licensed, everybody will come out of the same cookie cutter, we want you to look this way, talk this way, and be this way, in fact – this is one of the, there are about five things that crushed my spirit. One of them was, is we requested to go to Minneapolis, Minnesota and help their returning reservists, and that's, I think was like 3,000 of them. Okay, and they came back en masse to Minnesota and their counselors from, there aren't enough counselors in Minnesota to meet with them all. So we have to do anger management with them, okay? I mean, that's what they want, they want anger management.

KURTZ: 'Cause they just got extended for three months, too.

DEITS: Yes, okay. Who put together the anger management program that we had to basically read to them? The National Guard units. So we didn't get a ch--, we didn't get to say, 'You know, Kurtz, you guys? Tell me your experience.' We had to tell them what their experience was, even though we didn't have it. We didn't have that experience. But it was on paper, that "this is what you will say to them," we had a script in other words.

KURTZ: Oh boy.

DEITS: Yeah. Now not that it was all bad, but it was—

KURTZ: Everybody's different and you gotta deal with, I mean, when you've got a level of experience, you need to deal with people who've seen it before.

DEITS: Right. And you've gotta let them tell you what their experience was, and, and how it affects them, rather than I tell you that you should be feeling this way or that way or the other way. So that's how I think the system is going, it's going towards "we will tell you what's right and wrong in the world, we will tell you, you know, how you'll be okay in this world."

KURTZ: Is it though, the significant difference that from our generation, most everybody was there for two to four years, and although they say that a lot of the Vietnam people were veterans, I mean, the reality was you were gonna get drafted so you had to go and it was a compulsory type thing whereas a good percentage of the people now have made a decision that they want to be in the National Guard or, you know, in the military for a

while, thus--they feel more like, we have to be up on the script, I mean, I don't think in my experience I ever felt that I was goin' with any script, or anything like that. So I mean, I think that's a difference between this year's veterans and the—

DEITS: Right.

KURTZ: Is it that they—

DEITS: Right. You know, I think what happens is, again I'm not sure I have it exactly right but I think what happens that predate Vietnam and you have an eruption of, the values in the system, the World War II guys who went and fought and died for the country, and now we have a generation coming out and saying "well, we don't believe in those values. You didn't save us for, you didn't save us anything. Twenty years ago, or ten years ago we, we don't want those values, we reject those values. We want free love, drugs, we want, we don't want this productive, busy life that you guys had. We just want to live our, do our thing man," you know, and I think that's the clash of the culture of a younger generation and older generation. Vietnam is sort of in the middle of that. Who comes out of that? You know, how do we come out, more structure or less structure? And originally, we came out less structure. I think the people in power right now, they're the structuralists, they're not gonna have that crap. They're not gonna have a generation of people saying they're wrong and they can't do this. So you've got ten people dictating all policy everywhere. You know, I mean that's the way it looks to me.

KURTZ: Without asking a policy question, I mean, or a political question, isn't it a fact that, you know, a lot of the people that are making these policies never served, so they don't understand this.

DEITS: Right, and they're not even of the--of the strata that are doing these things. I mean yes, we've got a strata of people, but you know, I've talked to many, many of the young kids that have come back and basically the reason they go into the military is they're not super patriotic and they're not super stars and they're not super studs, they wanna go there for a benefit to themselves. It's salary and it's GI bill, and it's a way to improve their lot in life to go from some place in Fennimore to Madison, they want to, and the way to get there is through the National Guard. The way to get there is through that experience the government will get you there. So this is what I think happens, is the government ties your hands. They won't let you go anywhere unless you go their way. You know, they don't put money into just education, they put it into government education. You gotta do it their system way, or you're not gonna get it. You can't have national healthcare. Can't do it.

KURTZ: Well I want to ask you a personal question after I ask you this question: is there anything that we haven't talked about on these vet, like the Madison Vet Center, that we should have talked about?

DEITS: Um, you know probably, but I wouldn't know on the top of my head you know.

KURTZ: So I mean we've got pretty good brush of what this is all about.

DEITS: Yeah you know it's like that game where the things keep poppin' up and we're hittin' 'em and, I think we've got most of 'em down.

KURTZ: Um, the personal question is, is I always ask in each interview, is how the Vietnam experience affected the rest of your life. I've asked you that question already, but how, how has this experience affected your life where you're dealing with extremely troubled people. I mean, how has that affected you?

DEITS: Well it certainly tells me who my constituency on the planet is. You know, I know who I work for, or I work with best, and it's the people not at the high end it's with the people, not even in the middle, it's probably the people at the low end. I suspect that's because that's where I came from in the streets of Milwaukee was at the low end, then went to middle class, and then, you know, whatever. I never went to the higher class. In fact I went middle class and then back down, mostly in my working career. I think that, you know, for some reason I have more empathy for people that struggle the hardest. I don't have empathy for criminals and people that steal, but I have empathy for people who never got the fair shot, and what I, what I recognize, even in Vietnam, is the best people aren't always the leaders, they weren't the captains and the majors. Now they were, those were good people, they earned their stripes or they earned their bars, they did that. Um--you know there's a certain caliber of people that never gets to get above it. Lots of people I work with, you know, I try to work with, and I try to get 'em, you know so there's a couple of guys that can write in this magazine, and they still can say "you know, one thing I did on the planet is I wrote a story that went in a magazine." That's a pretty selective group.

KURTZ: Now will you stay with this magazine when you retire?

DEITS: Oh yes. That's really, I'm not--I'm the force that kind of kept it going over the long run, I'm not the force that got it into this form, it's a professor at the university and a couple other people that did that, but yeah I--I'll be a part of that. I mean, and I think the other thing that, to answer your question is, um, you know for the last twenty-some years I've worked with individuals, but I've also worked in the group setting with people. And

there's lots of good groups, ah, groups of people working with veterans. The danger is, is veterans are really easy to say that we're working with them. You know, society won't turn their back on veterans today anymore. But it's really will we allow them to have a quality of life you know, I mean, will medication replace the quality of life because they're, you know--and we're headed that way a little bit. Away from personal responsibility for their life, so I think that's a danger point.

KURTZ: Do you think you're going to have a decompression problem, come January of next year?

DEITS: Me?

KURTZ: Yes.

DEITS: Sure. Um, and I guess this is really what I was gonna say is I think finally I'm getting out of Vietnam, and this is the tough part. I mean, I didn't come out of Vietnam, that's probably why I didn't end up graduating from law school was I was still more in Vietnam than I was in the University of Wisconsin Law School. I was still there going to these vet meetings and stuff and, um--yeah, I think this is actually my, the date I'm leaving Vietnam.

KURTZ: Well you had a long tour.

DEITS: That's right.

KURTZ: And that--wow, I think that's a good note to end on right there. Thank you. [laughs]

[End of Interview]