

Cover Story: Doctor overcomes obstacles to help others with PTSD

Written by Story & Photos by Shepherd Waldenberger Sun Correspondent
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Dr. Paul Hegstrom took the stage at the Gallup High School auditorium Jan. 20-22 before a large and diverse crowd including health care providers, veterans, and couples. Over 200 people registered for the free post-traumatic stress disorder seminar funded by Gallup Indian Medical Services, and those who attended the entire event earned a certificate.

Hegstrom easily filled two and a half days with his knowledge and experience of PTSD, and he barely scratched the surface.

The doctor has lived a challenging and remarkable life. As a child, he was molested numerous times. When he brought it up with his parents, his mother replied that they were Christians and

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did not talk about sex. That was that.

He assumed responsibility for the abuse he received, since he knew no better, and this childhood trauma created what Hegstrom now calls “arrested development.” Basically, his emotional development ceased at around seven or eight years of age.

As he continued to grow and age, he failed to mature. When he married Judy (the first time) their relationship was rocky at best. They had three children together, but physical and emotional abuse tore the marriage apart, and Paul and Judy got a divorce.

Hegstrom moved on to other relationships, but he couldn’t escape his abusive tendencies.

Finally, he hit a wall. One of his abusive episodes ended with his girlfriend in the hospital and him facing 15-20 years in prison. It was time to change.

Hegstrom had been in and out of counseling numerous times already, but he had never found a program that could help him overcome his challenges. He tried again, and this time he made some headway, but he was still a long way from overcoming the trauma he experienced in childhood, so he began doing his own research to develop a form of therapy that could result in permanent change.

This path led him to found Life Skills International, a nonprofit organization headquartered in Aurora, Colo.

Hegstrom found a way to heal himself, and through LSI, he reportedly has been able to help thousands of others on the path to emotional maturity. LSI has over 100 centers in the U.S. and abroad, and he has now published several books as well.

“I had no knowledge of mental health, which has been to my advantage,” he said at the start of the seminar.

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His success is a result of a new approach to healing. Hegstrom wasn't bound by conventions of the mental health field. Instead, he was a patient seeking answers. With over 18,000 hours of research on domestic violence and related issues, he has found new methods to solve old problems.

"We are doing things that no one in the world has ever done," he said. When it comes to healing, "you have to change the core, or it's not going to work."

Hegstrom's approach is comprised of equal parts science and experience. At times, his remarks were quite technical, and he would frequently ask "does this make sense to anyone?" The crowd usually responded with nods, and the doctor would continue.

Though the topic of the seminar was quite serious, Hegstrom joked freely throughout, saying things like "I was as dumb as a bag of doorknobs when it came to women." His ability to jest about his dark history is testament to his transformation. The crowd picked up on his humor, and when he asked "what is a desirable man?" A woman responded, "covered in chocolate." Everyone shared a good laugh at that.

Hegstrom believes that everyone can be helped, no matter how bad their situation may seem.

"The worst guy in prison still has something redeemable," he said. When he realized that about himself, he was able to begin the process of maturing and creating the life he had always wanted.

He remarried Judy, and this time things are completely different. When he first mentioned getting back together she wanted no part of it, and for good reason. As time went on though, he proved himself through his actions.

"I earned her trust back," he said.

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During his seminar, Hegstrom said, “this is the first time I’ve released some of this information, and I chose to release it to the First Nations.”

He said that he feels a connection to Native communities, as he said that he is part Native himself, descended from the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma. His mother revealed this to him on her deathbed, he said, and he has since desired to bring his program to tribal communities, which is what landed him in Gallup.

He helped establish Family Life Skills of the First Nations, a pilot project of LSI based in Gallup.

“We work directly with Hegstrom,” Director Gillis Chapela said. Chapela is excited to use Hegstrom’s knowledge and strategies to help the Gallup community, and Hegstrom was equally excited to be in Gallup for the seminar.

“We’ve been working with Gillis for about three years to bring this together,” he said.

Meanwhile, trauma often travels from one generation to the next, which results in “children raising children.”

“I want to break the cycle,” Hegstrom said.

He is optimistic about the potential of his life skills program to heal old wounds and prevent new ones in families everywhere.

With FLSFN headquartered in Gallup, community members will soon have access to help based on Hegstrom’s methods. Chapela, who was born in Black Rock and has lived in Gallup for six decades, said that funding is currently underway, and he hopes courses will begin in March. The courses will be three hours a week for 30 weeks, and payment will be

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income-based.

Chapela is also hopeful that “scholarships could be available,” depending on funding. Anyone over 18 may enroll, and the courses will address overcoming a broad range of traumas. Wounds of war and of childhood can all be overcome with the upcoming life skills courses.

“It’s for everyone,” and “veterans would surely benefit,” he said.

For more information on LSI, visit www.lifeskillsintl.org , or call (303) 340-0598. For more about Family Life Skills of the First Nations, call (505) 862-3046.