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## Special Sections

Arts & Entertainment  
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Restaurant reviews  
Summer Camp Guide

## Columns & blogs

Biz Buzz  
Citizen Bill  
Drama Queen  
Easy Gardener  
The Eclectic Ear  
Editor's blog  
Fashionista  
Granola Park  
Green Voice  
Heart of Parenting  
Inside Blair  
Kids' Voice  
Photos  
Profiles  
Parents' Voice  
Question of the Month  
School Scene  
Silver Spring: Then & Again  
Silver Spring  
Sin of the Month  
Sligo Naturalist  
Sustainable Gardening  
Talk of Takoma  
Takoma Archives  
Talk of Takoma  
Takoma Pork  
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World on a Plate  
World View



November 2008

## Help comes in different guises

Sparky on the war brought home:  
"Can I see another's woe?"



Photo by Julie Wiatt

### John Breeskin — Sparky the Mind Doctor

Last year the Takoma Park poet-psychologist John Breeskin, a retired Air Force major who once tried out for the Packers and Eagles and who, at age 73, prefers to be called "Sparky" rather than by any professional title, was asked to talk to a young American soldier home from Iraq but unable to leave behind the affects of the war.

Sparky immediately agreed. "I could never refuse," he said, nibbling on a croissant, his main course during a recent lunch at Savory. "Helping kids who go off to war, naive, moral, vulnerable, and who come back psychologically injured – that's been my life."

In the late 1960's at Andrews Air Force Base outside Washington and also at Lakenheath in England, the young John Breeskin had in his charge a number of Vietnam vets who would revert to a crazed jungle agitation at the sound of a helicopter or the sight of an Asian passerby. As he and other military shrinks grappled with remedies, they authored a dreaded but now familiar diagnosis, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

For years Sparky continued to meet with the shell-shocked vets. "That used to be the diagnostic term, shell shock. Or battle fatigue," he said at Savory, sipping on tea, which constituted the rest of his meal. A cyclist and hiker -- he has walked the 65 miles to Harper's Ferry in one long day -- he weighs 10 pounds less than in his football days. "The assumption back then was that heavy combat mainly took a physical toll, and these guys would recover."

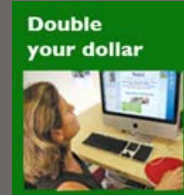
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**John Breeskin, an Air Force psychologist, in 1966.**

One of his patients was an Air Force pilot who refused to fly more missions after dropping bombs over a village. "The first reaction of his commanders was, 'You're yellow.' Then they changed it to, 'You're a psycho.' They medicated him, strait-jacketed him, and shipped him to Andrews. I had to cash in a lot of favors to keep him from getting a dishonorable discharge."

After a while he reached a conclusion that all along he had suspected. "For a lot of them there is no cure, only survival. Some are still living in cellars, still freaking out." Sparky's intense voice rippled up from his chest. "I am Russian and therefore melodramatic, but this breaks my heart."

He made it a rule to include the families of vets in his therapy because he found the trauma was transferring to them. "PTSD can claim spouses, children, friends. Even their psychologists." He quoted William Blake, "Can I see another's woe, and not be in sorrow, too?"

Whether Sparky's own psyche was changed by secondary PTSD is not for him to say, he said, but, after no luck with three marriages, he moved two years ago to Takoma Park for a fresh start -- "I should've come here much sooner. I've simplified my life."

He has stashed a pared-down collection of books and personal archives in half a Chaney Drive house that he shares on a romantic basis with his girlfriend, who otherwise lives in Charlottesville. His rooms are pleasant and artful. On one wall is a photograph of Walt Whitman, whose poetry was influenced by his time as a psychological nurse to the Civil War wounded.

These days Sparky teaches college students, writes a blog ("Sparky the mind doctor") and is at work on his memoirs. But, through a national organization known as Give An Hour, he has again become involved in the lives of war veterans, this time from Iraq.

"These soldiers are dealing with the same ambiguities as in Vietnam," he said. "Cry havoc, and let loose the dogs of war – that's us! There is no frontline, no foxholes. The enemy walks into a mess hall with bombs strapped around the waist. And back home there are no hero's welcomes."

The Iraqi War vet who called upon Sparky last year was a large-boned, gentle-voiced graduate of a Bible college in the Midwest. "A very sensitive God-fearing kid. I am sure I could devise a test that would have identified him as susceptible to PTSD. But how would you tell him, 'You can't go to war. You're too sensitive.'"

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