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Veteran researching hormonal changes in wounded soldiers

Caitlin Gleason
Special to the Times

(Editor's note: This story was provided courtesy of the Western Colorado University Marketing Communications office.)

Nature has long been viewed as a cure for stress, but why does it work?

Research is underway at Western Colorado University that seeks to study hormonal changes in wounded military veterans exposed to the outdoors. Stephen Otero, a former combat cameraman in the U.S. Air Force, is conducting the study with help from assistant professor of psychology Lindsey Fast.

Students who attend Western have their own stories on how they found this school located deep in the Rocky Mountains.

"I discovered (Western) after moving to the Gunnison Valley in the fall of 2015," Otero said. "I actually had no intention of returning to school after my military service ended. However, once I uncovered my own need (and) desire for additional life learning, I began to explore what college would look like for me."

Otero served in the Air Force for 12 years, including combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"I did not begin my relationship with Western in a traditional way," Otero said. "My first semester of real college was actually a NOLS Rocky Mountain Outdoor Educator semester that I took through the Extended Studies Department in the fall of 2016."

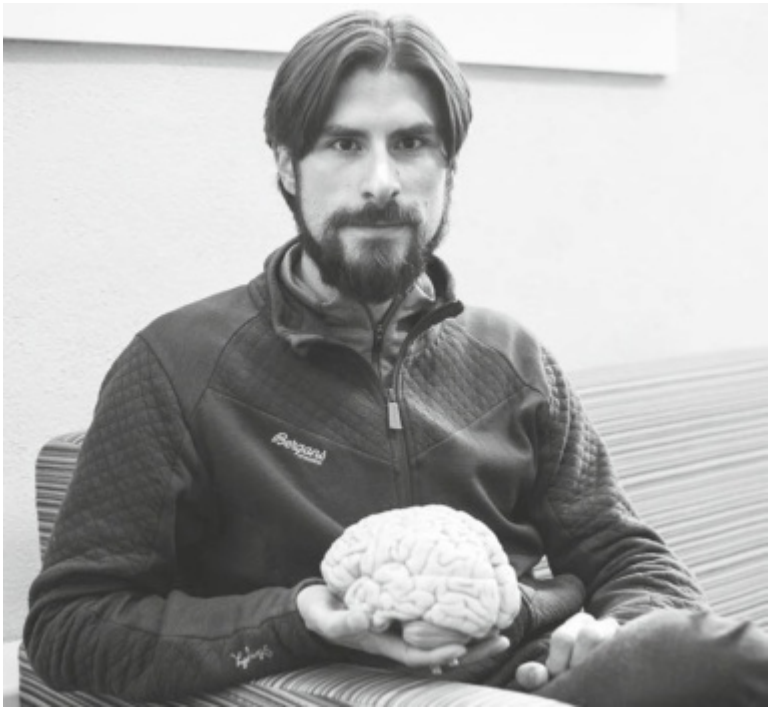
After that semester, Otero was tasked with writing about 8,000 words related to his experience and growth.

"I titled that paper, 'NOLS — My civilian basic training,'" Otero explained. "During those 90 days spent living in the field and working through austere environments with a team that was a full decade younger than (me), I was forced to learn and grow in ways that I had not thought of in a long time."

Passionate about the cause

The relationship that formed between Otero and Fast was unconventional. Otero was connected with Fast through a conversation with Lance Dalleck of Western's Exercise and Sport Science Department.

"Dr. Dalleck was right, and after sending (Fast) a random e-mail requesting a meeting, our professional relationship began," Otero explained. "She has since taken me under her wing to assist my crafting of (Institutional Review Board) proposals as well as teaching me



Taylor Cull

Stephen Otero holds a model of the human brain. The U.S. Air Force veteran is researching observed hormonal changes in military members who were wounded and who are now exposed to nature-based activities.

the capabilities of the equipment we have here on campus."

Fast was thrilled when she received an e-mail from Otero and was soon able to begin working with him.

"Steve is an amazing human, passionate about his cause to help those suffering," Fast said. "He has a voracious appetite for the cause, such that I know he will be successful in changing the world, even if one person at a time. He inspires me to do better."

Otero and Fast are researching observed hormonal changes in military members who were wounded and who are now exposed to nature-based activities.

"From hiking in the woods, to meditation, to yoga, to austere backcountry expeditions, we hope to learn about how and why these activities change the participants and afford a layer of scientific credibility to the organizations providing these opportunities for military veterans," Otero said. "This type of research has broad implications on not only the military community, but the entire first-responder community as well."

Otero believes that this nature-based therapy will work as well as pharmaceuticals for some.

"The ultimate goal is to influence policy regarding medical treatment options offered as a 'first line' defense to military veterans," he explained. "Prevention is medicine, and we believe that by focusing on the whole health of military members prior to engaging in high stress activities, we can actually save the American taxpayer money as well as enhancing the overall strength of the military."

Otero's goal is to provide as many choices of care for people as possible — a sort of "buffet" of options for a person to recover from injury and reduce potential for other health problems, depression included.

"We are all so different, nature-based therapy may not be the answer for everyone, and that is OK," Otero said. "I understand that. However, I want

to prove at least that this type of option (will work for some). I want to prove its efficacy for folks who do choose this."

'Monetizing a dream or passion'

As a veteran himself, Otero hopes that he can provide a unique perspective and give back to his fellow servicemen and women. Otero and Fast are looking to be able to work eventually with the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (VA).

"There are a lot of nonprofits that exist nationwide that are willing to allow us into their organization to perform collection," Otero recognized. "However, our ultimate goal is to get our foot in the door with the VA, because then we can directly access the patient population that we hope to provide advice to in the future."

Fast is thrilled with Otero's work and happy to be a part of it.

"Steve is going to be one of the most successful individuals Western ever produces," Fast said. "I know this and hope we work hard to serve him and the cause in the best way we possibly can."

Otero began studying nature-based therapy due to his passion for the topic, and he urges others to do the same.

"I would encourage any student, veteran or not, to look at how to best leverage their college experience to benefit their overall sense of life satisfaction," said Otero. "One of the greatest challenges I see as a leader is assisting people with monetizing a dream or passion."

That's especially true for college students who are working toward discovering their dreams, said Otero, whose curiosity has led to the research project.

"While difficult to 'live the dream,' it is far from impossible and more than likely easier to attain than one may think," Otero added. "Worry and fear prevent people from taking action. When a person manages their fear, they can do anything. They can achieve their dreams and even get paid for it."

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