

Visually impaired vets learn craft of fly tying

By Lisa Reisman

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BRANFORD — Imagine pouring a cup of coffee and not being able to tell when it's near the top without burning your finger. Or going into a convenience store without any way to identify a bag of chips, or distinguish between bill denominations when you're at the checkout counter.

Those were among the challenges faced by Marine Corps veteran and Purple Heart recipient Bruce Boice who, in addition to constant back pain from getting shot in the lower back in Vietnam, suffers from diabetes which, he said, "is messing up my eyes.

"When you have trouble seeing, you can't do the things you're used to doing, the simplest things," said the good-natured, mustachioed Boice at a recent fly tying workshop hosted by Branford's Take A Vet Fishing and the Hammonasset Chapter of Trout Unlimited at the First Baptist Church of Branford.

Boice was one of eight veterans at the workshop from the West Haven VA's Eastern Blind Rehab Center, which offers "both residential and outpatient services to help [blind and visually impaired] veterans develop personal independence along with reintegration into their families and communities," accord-



Lisa Reisman / For Hearst Connecticut Media

John Valik (foreground), a resident at the West Haven VA's Eastern Blind Rehab Center with Trout Unlimited's Rick Huntley, tying a fly at the recent Take a Vet Fishing fly tying workshop at the First Baptist Church of Branford.

ing to its website.

Even so, fly tying, the intricate process of attaching materials to a hook to imitate insects that fish and larva feed on, would seem a daunting proposition for anyone to learn, much less someone with limited sight.

That was precisely the reaction, 10 years ago, of Ray Luhn, a board member of Take A Vet Fishing, which has as its mission is to engage and provide fellowship to disabled and recovering veterans by getting them "out of the clinical environment for a relaxing day of fishing,"

as its website reads.

"[The late board member] Ed Ochman had the idea of including fly tying instruction as an activity for veterans in the winter," Luhn said, amid the hum of 25 veterans, volunteers, and EBRC aides bent over long tables in the mellow light of the church's Fellowship Hall.

When the VA sent a group of veterans from the Blind Center, "we thought it was a cruel joke," he said.

Then longtime TAVF member Hugh McCutcheon spoke up. "We'll make it work," Luhn recalled him saying.

"We needed to have our eyes open to the possibility," Luhn said. Since then, "it's been pure joy, for us, for the veterans, for everyone."

Just ask John Valik, a visually impaired Marine veteran who'd just arrived at the Blind Center from Johnstown, NY.

"It's great learning something new," he said, as Trout Unlimited's Rick Huntley talked him through cinching down lengths of gold and purple bucktail feather by winding a thread counterclockwise on a vise, snipping, and cinching again, until Valis had a homespun fly that might well outwit an unsuspecting fish.

"This is as much about meeting and socializing with each other as it is about tying flies," said Manchester's Arthur A. Duke Jr., a Vietnam Army veteran who suffers from macular degeneration and is writing a novel titled "You Are Not You Anymore" about the experience of losing one's sight.

Working on the book, he said, is much easier, with the training he's undergone at the Blind Center, including the use of magnifiers to more easily read what he's written and the Seeing AI (artificial intelligence) app, which reads text out loud as it comes into view, and scans and reads documents like books and letters.

"It's given me hope for a whole

new life," said Duke, a dog breeder who showed his Camelot's Papillons at Westminster Dog Show for years.

For EBRC Blind Rehab Specialist Mark Matthiessen, that's the point of the Blind Center — and the fly tying workshops.

"The overall objective of blind rehab can be expressed in two words: maximizing performance," he said. "We don't repair vision. What we do through the use of devices and equipment and training and philosophy is allow people to get the most out of the vision they have."

A craft like fly tying "might seem impossible for a person who's visually impaired," he said, "so when you realize you can in fact do it with the right instruction, the right tools and devices, it's a real confidence builder."

Just ask Boice, who enthusiastically demonstrated to curious observers the way the Seeing AI app on his iPhone uses a bar code scanner to help him identify that bag of chips, and described the liquid level indicator he sets on the lip of his coffee mug each morning.

"Learning to tie a fly is just another skill," he said. "Bring it on."

▶▶ Take a Vet Fishing, visit tavf.org; Eastern Blind Rehabilitation Center, https://www.connecticut.va.gov/CONNECTICUT/features/Eastern_Blind_Rehabilitation_Center.asp