

## The Next Chapter

### Farm Girl to Healing Therapist The Irrepressible Shirley Godwin

**Jan K. Herman, MA**

The Historian of Navy Medicine (ret.)

Tel: (202) 431-6901

E-mail: histguy45@yahoo.com

#### Introduction

This special article continues our series that regularly appears in the *Journal of Health and Human Experience*, "Profiles in Courage: The Next Chapter." This series highlights individuals of our time who move us to a greater understanding of the human experience of health and healthcare.

This biography celebrates Dr. Shirley Godwin, a very special individual who has brought healing to many over the years. It is based upon interviews with Dr. Godwin, a psychologist who worked extensively in healthcare with the United States Navy and Marine Corps.

The opinions in this article are those of the author alone. The author has no financial conflicts of interest.

#### Tilling the Soil...

I met Shirley Godwin almost 10 years ago. She was then a youthful 81, and her reputation as a counselor and therapist had already preceded her. The sparkling eyes, warm handshake, and ready laugh immediately cemented our friendship. I am not the only one to have become an instant fan and admirer. Shirley's expansive personality draws in all she meets, a positive attribute for someone in her profession.

How best to describe this remarkable individual, raised on a rural farm in Washington State during the Depression, and now an ageless woman of 91. Self-reliant, resourceful, and ever optimistic, Shirley had already worked and raised a family before beginning a distinguished career as a counselor and therapist in her 60s.

Shirley Godwin (born Shirley Wilson) was born in 1927 in Everett, Washington, but spent her early years on Vashon Island, the largest island in Washington's Puget Sound. It was a very countrified upbringing. During the school year, an estimated 2,500 people lived on the island, but that population swelled to almost 6,000 during the summer. Shirley attended a one-room schoolhouse until sixth grade.

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As a young girl, Shirley was not interested in academic learning. She grew up on a farm consisting of 13 acres of apple, peach, cherry, and plum trees. The Wilson family also raised berries. They were self-sufficient, eating the crops from their land, a frugality dictated by the Great Depression.

Even though it was a happy childhood, Shirley also recalls great poverty in the 1930s, the family depending on welfare part of the time. “We were given cheese, flour, sugar, and yeast. The rest we got from our land or our animals. We raised chickens, rabbits, and pigs, and I picked berries to sell. We were self-sustaining and that’s the way it was. The flour sacks we got our flour in had printing on the material. My sister and I were raised wearing flour sack dresses. We never liked that. I was the youngest, so I was worse off. I had to wear secondhand flour sack dresses.”

When her stepfather was not laboring on the farm, he took on various jobs for the Works Progress Administration (WPA) for a few hours a month during those lean years. Shirley remembers, “He worked on the roads and anything else they had for him to do.”

One of her mid-teenage memories of Vashon Island and its citizens occurred during the earliest days of America’s entry into World War II. It is a bittersweet remembrance that tells much of how she and other Vashon residents dealt with injustice. She remembers joining her neighbors as they lined the hillsides sadly watching the ferry take their Japanese-American neighbors to captivity in one of the notorious internment camps. Shirley can still see the handmade signs the locals all held up: “We Love You.” “Hurry Back.” “Please Take Care of Yourselves.”

Shirley did not blossom in academics until she was much older. “Back in those years--the ’30s and ’40s--girls were supposed to grow up, get married, and have a family,” she recounts. Following that dictate, Shirley herself married at age 17 after she graduated from high school. She had then attended business school in San Diego where she met a Marine. The marriage lasted only a few years but not before she and her young husband had two children. “He went off to work one day and that’s the last I heard of him for the next three years.”

At the time, Shirley worked three days a week at a San Diego ship chandlery while putting her children in a nursery school. She needed a full-time job and finally found work at a marine insurance company, a job she held for the next 26 years, rising from an office girl to the company’s chief insurance policy negotiator. “My boss depended more and more on me and so did the company. I became very good friends with the folks at Lloyds of London and negotiated insurance with them.” As she reminisces, it was the heyday of the tuna fishing industry, and her company insured the bulk of San Diego’s fishing fleet. “During that time, a couple of our fishing boats just totally disappeared at sea --- crew, boat, and all.”

Abandoned by her husband, Shirley, the self-reliant farm girl from Vashon Island, made ends meet supporting herself and two children. She then married again, a Navy pilot. Their marriage lasted 26 years. In 1980, when her last child left home, she again divorced, all the time continuing to work for the insurance company that had treated her so well.

### Seeding...

It was her third marriage to David Godwin that truly changed her life. Dr. Godwin, a family practice physician in La Jolla, California, had been a military doctor during the Vietnam War. He was not only a prominent and respected member of the community but very well educated with several other degrees and many interests. Most importantly, David Godwin, a highly supportive husband, encouraged his wife to obtain the education she never had. And now that Shirley was economically secure, that higher form of instruction was obtainable, even though she was now in her early 50s.

Her more serious education began at age 51 at Mesa Junior College in San Diego where she obtained all her prerequisites for climbing the scholastic rungs toward something --- whatever that something was. But she still did not have any pointed academic direction. Nevertheless, she leaned toward psychology and the behavioral sciences.

After graduating from Mesa, Shirley took classes at National University in San Diego for a year and then United States International University (USIU), now called Alliant University. The San Diego-based USIU, was an American Psychological Association-rated school. That official accreditation is what she needed to get her master's degree in behavioral science. The APA accredits doctoral programs in clinical, counseling, and school psychology, as well as predoctoral internship and postdoctoral residency training programs.

However, Shirley could not get a PhD without doing an internship and acquiring some experience. She got that practical experience at Naval Station, San Diego in the Family Service Center as a supervised intern. She began working at the center in 1987 and accumulated the requisite hours and experience in supervised counseling. "The more responsibility that was given to me, the more I liked it and thrived." While at the Family Service Center, she also accumulated training in suicide prevention and family violence. As an intern, Shirley worked 40 hours a week for no pay.

She saw patients and sometimes filmed sessions with them. The Family Service Center dealt mainly with infidelity and marital issues of all kinds. "The average age at that time was 22," Shirley points out. "Most of the sailors and Marines were away from home and got married so they'd have someone in their life. They had no marital skills. Many had no good role models and didn't have any idea what marriage was all about. Having such a time getting my own life on the right track, I used to say that these kids couldn't show me anything I hadn't already experienced."

Shirley Godwin was now working exclusively in a military environment. To be sure, she loved being immersed in the military culture. Much of that affection and her growing commitment to serving sailors, Marines, and their families had to do with her brother, Benjamin Wilson, a career soldier and the older brother she adored.

Perhaps "career soldier" was an understatement. Ben was a warrior through and through. As a very young man, he had witnessed firsthand the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. In brutal hand-to-hand combat during the Korean War, he had displayed such valor that he received the Medal of Honor, Distinguished Service Cross, and Purple Heart. But those decorations came at a tremendous cost. Shirley recalls the frightening change in Ben when he returned home. "He really had post-traumatic stress and it came out in a very scary way."

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What Ben Wilson witnessed in combat destroyed his life, cost him his marriage and his children, and everything else a severe case of PTSD could inflict. “I began to realize why my brother was so dramatically different when he came back from the Korean War. As a result of his experience, I became a deployment specialist because I wanted to know what happens to people who go to war. Helping them recover became my focus.”

During Operation Desert Storm, the combat phase of the first Persian Gulf War of 1990-1991, Shirley was presented with a new opportunity: becoming director of the Return and Reunion Program. She was almost 60 at the time and still working at Naval Station San Diego’s Family Service Center.

Shirley, who had now become the program director and team leader, found that to be more effective as a counselor, she and her teammates would have to see their clients where they worked --- aboard ship. That realization changed her circumstances. She could no longer work as an unpaid “intern.” She became an official civilian employee of the U.S. Navy.

Shirley and her four-person team (three females and one male) went out to sea and designed programs for whatever situation they encountered. She and the team would be flown to where the military personnel --- sailors and Marines who had seen combat in the Gulf War ---boarded ship for their voyage home. On that return trip, the team would provide counseling to what was a “captive audience.” She and the team made four voyages, each beginning in Hong Kong and ending in San Diego. They counseled both sailors and Marines attending shipboard workshops and offered individual counseling. “We provided workshops and lectures for war fighters on how to return to family after long-term deployment: sex and intimacy, returning to children, new dads. We had a lot of young men who had become dads while they were deployed. We went to sea and made programs for whatever we encountered.”

One of those programs was handling infidelity. “How do you go home after you’ve been unfaithful? We created a program to deal with that,” Shirley recalls with pride. She set up hour-long workshops and the team saw clients in the evening. She and her colleagues found that many of the counselors were not much older than the clients, and those clients were not interested in taking advice from counselors they saw as their peers. They wanted to see someone older. And that mature, older person was Shirley, an amalgam of counselor, therapist, mother, and grandmother. “When we were through for the day, I would have three hours of people standing in line to see me for individual counseling.”

When she first started the program, no females were aboard ship. “The men felt very vulnerable. This was before instant messaging, etc. They had been out of touch with their families. Were their wives mad at them for being gone so long? Did their spouses still love them? I never thought men felt this way. I realized it wasn’t just women who were going through a bad time but also the men.”

Moreover, it was not just the family dynamics endangering their well-being, Shirley and her team also found that the sailors were under stress. “They had seen scud missiles being fired at their comrades ashore, and although they weren’t under direct attack, they spent all their time being scared.”

Shirley remembers “walking the deck all night with some of the sailors. They were awaiting their first sight of San Diego. These guys were so excited to be going home. Over the loudspeaker would come the call, ‘Land Ho!’ And then it was like rats scurrying around trying to see the lights of the city. As the lights got brighter, I noted their vulnerabilities getting worse. So I’d walk the deck at night talking with them, sometimes in groups, sometimes individually. It was a very interesting, rewarding time for me. It seems as though I was seeing a piece of my brother in all of the returnees. They loved their war buddies, and the thing that affected them the very most was the fact that they couldn’t help their wounded brothers.”

It was also a busy time as Shirley was still a part-time student working toward a PhD. Tragically, her husband David died at the end of her first year in the program at United States International University, triggering a crisis on many levels. Overwhelmed with grief, she was not sure she could continue in the program. Her professors recognized her superior intellect and natural affinity for learning, and they encouraged their “senior” student to continue. The faculty were very willing to be flexible with deadlines, and knew Shirley was dedicated to studying and excelling in her academic regimen. As always, she rose to the challenge.

Women on deployment became the subject of her dissertation. And no wonder. Since working with the Return and Reunion Program, she had expanded her base of experience many times over, becoming very familiar working with men. But times were changing. More women were serving aboard ship, and Shirley noticed they avoided her workshops and lectures. She had tried to convince them to participate but found them suspicious and very aloof.

“I just had to know why women wouldn’t talk to us and so that became the subject of my dissertation. I would interview women within 60 days of having returned from a long-term deployment. I would talk to them to try to determine why our program didn’t serve their needs and why they refused to come.”

She found that servicewomen who had children and left them and their husbands behind felt rebuked by other women not in their situation. Friends or family members might snidely state, “Oh, I could never do that. How could you leave your children?”

Some of her client-subjects were women who joined the armed forces for a variety of reasons, including: seeking a career in the military and eventually becoming eligible for retirement; trying to please their fathers who didn’t have a son. These female client-patients thought they would be harshly judged. That kind of preconceived judgment turned out to be the main reason the women avoided Shirley and her mostly female therapy team.

Needless to say, Shirley’s dissertation subject became much more than a mere academic exercise. It directly affected the work Shirley was becoming accustomed to, and she admits she enjoyed writing up her observations and conclusions. “I took a lot of literary license with it. At the time, we didn’t have a well-educated military. Today we do. I decided I wouldn’t use all these fancy words in my dissertation. I would write it in plain readable language that anyone could read and understand. One of my readers had been Dr. Jonas Salk’s biographer. She had a PhD in English and I figured she would never approve my dissertation. She wrote me a letter telling me it was such a pleasure to read. Because many of the women I interviewed during my study had given the most poignant responses to my questions, my dissertation committee said they all cried when they read it.”

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Shirley was 63 when she began her doctorate program in 1990. When she graduated three years later, she proudly recalls “walking across the stage twice, once to receive my degree and the next to accept the outstanding dissertation award from the Marriage and Family Department.”

But the newly minted Dr. Shirley Godwin confronted yet another crisis. “It was such a letdown. Suddenly I didn’t have anything to do. I wasn’t working at the time. I had graduated and suddenly I was 66 years old. My family had come for my graduation. I was living in La Jolla at the time and had a large plate glass window that overlooked the sea. After my family left that night, I stood at that window and I sobbed and sobbed. ‘What am I going to do? I’m finished with school and I don’t have a job. What am I going to do?’ I had never applied for a job in my life. I had had interviews to be an intern, but I never had to interview for a job. I stood in that window and prayed. ‘God, I don’t know what to do. I’m leaving this in your hands.’”

### Unexpected Harvests...

It seemed that her prayer was answered overnight. “At 9:00 the next morning my phone rang. It was the Family Service Center director at Naval Air Station Miramar. The director said, ‘Shirley, I need someone for four months to come and set up a sexual assault awareness program in accordance with an OPNAV [order issued by the Chief of Naval Operations] instruction. Before we can close down and turn this base over to the Marines, we have to have a fully operational program and undergo an accreditation.’”

The very next day, Shirley reported for duty at Miramar as a volunteer until she could officially be brought on board in two weeks as a paid employee. Four months later, the sexual assault awareness program was up and running and her temporary position ended.

Shirley was not idle very long before another opportunity presented itself. While attending a meeting in Washington, DC, she met a counselor from Naval Air Station Sigonella on the island of Sicily. After a brief discussion, she was offered a job to set up a sexual assault program at that base. Her reputation had indeed preceded her. The position was to last for 18 months. She stayed five years.

At Sigonella, Shirley followed the prototype she had created at Miramar, but she crafted it to suit the needs of that facility. This meant working closely with nurses and physicians at the hospital. Sexual assault cases required evidentiary examinations, and Shirley, as a professional, had to be cognizant of the chain of custody in the handling of evidence. She spent much of her time at the hospital, sometimes assisting while medical personnel conducted the required exams. She had no paid staff but trained volunteers to act as advocates for sexual assault victims. Her chosen trained advocates would help walk the victims through the entire process.

Shirley had duty at the Family Service Center but also worked hand-in-hand with a psychologist. “He trusted me and I trusted him. We’d send the victims back to the states where they could get adequate care and support, and, as a result, we saved a lot of women that way. Women would be sexually assaulted by someone they had to work with. They had to go away and come back strong so they could function.”

After that five-year stint at Sigonella, Shirley began yet another chapter in her career: counseling wounded warriors, not as a government employee, but as a contractor working for Health Net, a private company that provided counselors and other services to the military. Within weeks, she was on her way to Fort Hood, Texas, following the tragic shooting at that post in November 2009. She stayed two months counseling both service members and their families. She was given other assignments, most notably Fort Riley, Kansas, and Fort Drum, New York. She found the effort satisfying but really wanted to work with wounded warriors. After all, her warrior brother had been wounded in both body and spirit, and Ben was always in her thoughts.

Her new assignment was at Camp Pendleton, California, which had an active wounded warrior unit. Shirley was a unit therapist, working for Health Net, which contracted with the Marine Corps to run the program on the base. “We talked to their psychiatrists and psychologists and had a pretty good handle as to what was going on. Most were brain-injured and had PTSD. The amputees were treated at Medical Center San Diego.”

Shirley and the other counselors listened intently to the wounded warriors “If someone was off the track, we were encouraged to talk with their psychologists assigned to them. I found the atmosphere relaxed and informal. They seemed ready to talk to us readily because we weren’t writing everything down and not outwardly assessing them. I developed a very special relationship with them as a group. They were used to seeing me around in an informal way. I ate with them. I went to Bible study with them. I did all the things that they did, and I earned their trust.”

Shirley’s client-patients were mostly Marines. Besides scheduled activities, such as bike riding, swimming, and music therapy, counseling was obviously a major portion of their therapy. “I talked to so many of them in depth. If someone was alone and looked disturbed, I’d begin talking with them. Eventually we’d get to what was bothering them. They’d start out telling me how much they hated all the medications they were on. They begged the doctors to take them off them because they couldn’t function. That was because they were so stoned out on the medication. In addition to the drugs, many were also drinking a lot of alcohol.”

Shirley adds another chilling account about some of the patients who were free to go home at night. And for those Marines, the terror at times became overwhelming. “Occasionally, a Marine would tell me they would be afraid to go into the bedroom where the door could be shut. Instead they would sleep on the sofa with a gun within easy reach, afraid someone would break in in the middle of the night. Of course, these stories reminded me of my brother, who many times told me that he couldn’t sleep. He said that when he closed his eyes he always saw the eyes of the people he had killed.”

She continues, “I also heard some very sad stories. They’d talk about losing their marriages and their children and knowing they would never be normal again. It all reminded me of my brother.”

Shirley and her colleagues quickly learned that many of the brain-injured knew their prognosis was not good, thus becoming good candidates for early onset dementia. Moreover, their longevity was in question.

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Despite the sad outlook for many of her client-patients, Shirley remained at Camp Pendleton for three years and relished every moment. “In my mid-80s, I drove 35 miles to work each day because I loved being with those people.”

### **And so it continues...**

Shirley Godwin at age 91, although “retired” since 2013, is still in the game, informally advising other counselors she once worked with or a new generation of therapists. They call her frequently with problems and she provides guidance based on years of hard-earned experience.

Having broken her hip in a pool-side accident a few years ago, she is now fully recovered and has not noticeably curtailed her activity. She has traveled to Europe in the past two years with friends and several former counseling colleagues.

Looking back on a career that began when most careers usually end, Shirley expresses her gratefulness whenever she can. “I got to develop all kinds of programs, travel, and meet the most amazing people. I was so fortunate. Imagine all the experience I had. I always thought the military did more for me than I ever did for them. I know I’ve gotten back much more than I ever gave.”

Like a fine wine, the irrepressible Dr. Shirley Godwin just gets better with age.