

SYNOPSIS :

VETERANS GARDEN

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Only 34% of the twenty three million living military veterans are enrolled in the Veterans Healthcare System. Coming from a military culture that considers psychological issues a sign of weakness many disabled veterans avoid proper care. Others struggle to receive benefits from an overwhelmed Veterans Administration.

The **Veterans Garden** is a horticultural therapy program inside the VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare Campus. This program is dedicated for U.S. military veterans recovering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), alcoholism or drug addiction or to combat depression or schizophrenia that often accompanies disability. Veterans receive occupational training in horticulture, landscaping and in small business operation. It helps them to develop new interest in life and to relearn how to work and to assume responsibility. Each patient is following by their own psychiatrist and Rosa Nielsen, therapist manager.

Veterans used to stay at the garden as long as the therapy worked for them, but since 2008 they have two choices:

- **Incentive Therapy (IT)** program offers work assignment to veterans who have disability income. They are paid four to five dollars per hours by the Veterans Administration.
- **Compensated Work Therapy (CWT)** program is a vocational rehabilitation program to re-enter into the community. The salary of seven dollars per hours comes from the sales. After six months of therapy at the garden, they have to start looking for jobs while continuing the therapy at the garden. So, upcoming veterans, especially from Iraq or Afghanistan, can be treated.

Since its inception twenty four years ago, more than 500 veterans have gone through the program. They used to have an average of thirty recovering veterans tending the ground. In March 2009, only fifteen between 50 to 90 years old most of them from the Vietnam War era were following the program, some for more than ten years.

This photo-documentary is part of a long-term project called **Backdraft**. This study critically explores the domestic consequences of America's military endeavors on military veterans and their families. It looks at the work of individuals or organizations that provide for their needs or that explore the intrusion of militarism in the U.S. society.

EPILOGUE:

On April 1st, 2009, The Los Angeles Veterans Administration decided to cut all the funds coming from the sales of plants and vegetables. The Cultivate Worker therapy patients had no others choices to leave and the Instant therapy patient could only stay.

On December 1st, 2009, a private Californian non profit organization, *Rancho Santa Anna Botanic Garden* was selected to run the *Veterans Garden*. Rosa Nielsen is not allowed to work at the garden anymore and can only do the therapy of the remaining veterans at her desk located in building 208.

The fate of the *Veterans Garden* and the Veterans are uncertain for the moment...