COMING TO LIGHT

As the 50th anniversary of the Tet Offensive neared last year, I sat down with each of them to ask about their "war stories." While I am close with my father, his time overseas remained a mysterious black hole in his life story. The same was true for Gary, whom I have known for more than 12 years while leading his foundation and helping him shape his philanthropic legacy. As we talked, these two 71-year-old men seemed to transform back into the 21-year-old men who were plucked from the safety and comfort of rural America and dropped into a tropical jungle half a world away where danger lurked at every turn.

My father’s draft notice arrived five days after I was graduated from West Virginia Technical College. He didn’t want to go, but as a brash young man, he wasn’t scared of it either, at least not at first. "I thought I could take on the world," he said. "That changed the day my mother said, ‘If you let me come home, I will work to provide for the basic health needs of our most vulnerable citizens due to our grossly oversized healthcare system.'"

I’m grateful for the wisdom Gary and my father have shared with me over the years. I’m even more grateful for the love, humanitarianism and examples of selflessness for social responsibility in life and work.

They arrived in Vietnam as boys and returned as men, battered and bruised, but with an altruism forged in the crucible of combat. They want to help their communities and make good on their foxhole promises.

This is an excerpt. For the complete story go to https://usat.ly/foxholes

Learn more about Gary and Mary West’s philanthropic efforts to lower healthcare costs and improve care for seniors at westhealth.org

By Shelley Lyford for West Health