

## Madison VA Hospital finds stories behind the patients



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Sitting beside his hospital bed, Bill Rodder talked about taking part in the naval blockade of Cuba during the Cuban Missile Crisis, a tense time in U.S. history.

He recalled growing up in rural Ohio and running a restaurant in San Francisco.

Thor Ringler took notes and asked questions. Then Ringler wrote Rodder's life story — not for a book or a magazine, but for Rodder's medical chart.

My VA, My Story, a project at Madison's Veterans Hospital, is trying to foster a closer connection between patients and their providers by bringing attention to their personal tales.

"You get this snapshot of the person, what their values are, what they've been through," Ringler said. "It's very different information from anything else in their chart."

The project started in March as a way to improve patients' experiences, said Dr. Eileen Ahearn, a psychiatrist at the hospital. It also boosts doctors' morale — and possibly their performance — to know more about their patients, Ahearn said.

"Medicine has become quite de-personalized," she said. "If you have a more complete picture of the person you're treating, you're probably going to do a better job."

The project, part of a patient-centered care initiative at the Veterans Health Administration, caught the attention of caregivers at Mendota Mental Health Institute in Madison. They are looking at starting a similar effort.

Rodder, 74, is one of 176 patients Ringler and others have interviewed. In the hospital for a broken neck bone, he said he was happy Ringler wanted to hear his story.

"It also helped me with my memory," said Rodder, who lives in an assisted living facility in Oregon and served in the Navy from 1962 to 1967.

Doctors typically don't have time to ask patients much about their backgrounds, but they can take five or 10 minutes to read the one- or two-page summaries of their life stories, said Dr. Matt Crowe, an internal medicine doctor at the hospital.

Some of the stories recount hardships patients have endured, Crowe said.

"You can't help but feel a lot of empathy," he said. "Understanding that makes you be more patient and forgiving."

Ringler, a poet and therapist, goes room to room and asks patients if they want to tell their stories. About 60 percent say yes, he said. Then he sits down with a recorder and notepad and talks to them for an hour or so.

He lets the veterans review their stories and make changes, if desired, before putting the stories in their medical charts.

Two other VA employees — a therapist and a nurse who served in Afghanistan — also interviewed patients until September, when a national VA grant for the project ended.

Now Ringler, whose position has been extended for a year by the hospital, is training volunteers to help him reach more patients.

Ringler recently interviewed Bill Akins, 89, who served on a minesweeper with the Navy during World War II.

Akins worked as a plumber and boiler operator at Truax Field in Madison. In 1981, he built “Chapel in the Pines” in Arena, where he lives.

“I made it in the old-fashioned way, like my dad built his chapel back in Tennessee,” he said in his story by Ringler.

“People can come to visit anytime, day and night,” Akins told the State Journal.

Rodder grew up in Poland, Ohio, with a father who immigrated from Germany in the early 1930s, “before the insanity took over,” he told Ringler.

Rodder’s mother owned a record store and inspired his love of playing the piano.

After earning a philosophy degree from the University of Pittsburgh in 1961, Rodder joined the Navy to avoid being drafted into the Army or the Marine Corps. “I didn’t want to live in a foxhole,” he said.

In July 1962, he was assigned to the aircraft carrier U.S.S. Independence, encrypting and decoding messages. The ship took part in the naval blockade of Cuba, which didn’t seem to trouble Rodder.

“I felt secure on that ship, like nothing would ever happen,” he said.

He was also stationed in Vietnam but didn’t face combat.

After accounting and sales jobs with Proctor & Gamble and General Electric, Rodder ended up in San Francisco. He and a friend bought the restaurant “The Hungry Mouth,” which he helped run for nearly 20 years.

Rodder moved to the Madison area about 15 years ago to be near his sister. He has played piano and organ at churches in the area.

After Ringler told him he could use the piano at the VA hospital chapel, Rodder went there a few days later and played.

## THOR RINGLER



Thor Ringler works as a writer/editor at the Madison VA Hospital where he manages the My VA, My Story project. My VA, My Story team members interview veterans about their life stories, write up narratives based on the interviews, revise the stories with veteran input, add them to the electronic medical record, and share the stories with the veteran's care team. The aim of the project is to foster a closer connection between VA providers and the veterans in their care.

He started writing poetry again after a 5 year vacation to graduate school and is inspired by the stories of the veterans he interviews. Most of his poems are about these interviews. He states, "I'm very honored to be able to listen to other people's stories, to do my best to write their stories, and to share them with others."

Ringler has an MFA in Poetry from the University of Pittsburgh, and an MS in Marriage and Family Therapy from Edgewood College, and lives in Madison. His wife April is an art teacher with the Madison Schools. His son Fritz is entering high school this fall and his daughter Archie will be in seventh grade. His family is the most important thing in his life. He is currently working on a collection of poems and stories related to his work at the VA.