

# The Hat

By Mary Swiggum, PT, PhD

## Introduction

My husband was so strong, athletic, caring. I fell in love with him when I witnessed how gently and lovingly he cared for clients at a residential facility. We ran races together, finished a marathon, cycled, enjoyed life, and eventually adopted our daughter from Ukraine. A year later, we began what has become a 21-year cancer journey that has gradually taken away physical parts of my husband, and more recently, his spirit.

Yet, he is still a warrior. He survived a year in hospice care. We received a balloon when we were discharged. How odd. He survived stage 3 rectal cancer, stage 4 oral cancer, multiple surgeries, episodes of chemotherapy and radiation. And he survived the Vietnam War and exposure to Agent Orange.

My husband has always liked to wear a hat. In recent years, I believe he likes a hat to cover up his long hair and to hide his facial features. We were at a VA appointment when I saw hats for sale. I encouraged him to look for a new one. To my surprise, he picked out one that said, "Vietnam War Veteran." My husband was drafted and never liked to talk about his experiences in Vietnam. He hid them even from himself. In recent years, tears will fall down his cheeks when he watches documentaries about Vietnam. But

still no words. I was shocked that he picked that hat but more shocked at the effect it had on him.

The idea to write this poem came to me after taking my husband on a cruise. I was mesmerized by how animated he became when he wore the Hat. People came over to him and talked, thanked him, asked him questions. He couldn't hide from them, and they no longer chose to hide from him. He now wears his Vietnam cap everywhere.

The picture is of my husband, Lars, and our daughter, Ally.



**The Hat**

and breathed

deadly pesticide

You were old,

worn, disheveled,

unkempt,

riddled with cancer,

*“Thank you for your service”*

*“What branch did you serve in?”*

People looked

with pity,

If at all,

At dinner you

take off the **Hat**

But the glow,

the pride in your eye

Remains

*Then.....*

You put on the Hat,

You recognized

A former self,

A boy man drafted,

who saw unspeakable acts,

abysmal squalor

## *About the Author*



**Mary Swiggum, PT, PhD** is a physical therapist who has been practicing for 39 years and has been a pediatric specialist since 1996. She is an Associate Professor at Wingate University, Doctor of Physical Therapy Program, and a contract home health therapist for Full Circle Pediatric Therapy. Mary has been married to her husband for 33 years and has been his caregiver since 2012. They have a 21-year-old daughter, Ally.