

Health Headlines

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Veterans of the Bronx VA “Chill Like Bill” Group Therapy and Bill (seated)

“Chill Like Bill” – Bronx VAMC Men’s Group Therapy

Nobody would say that Bill Crain has a simple life. Diagnosed with “Lou Gehrig’s Disease” (ALS) in 2011, everyday routines, like getting himself dressed, can represent a monumental chore. But Bill doesn’t let life’s challenges set him back. Instead, he forges ahead, inspiring others with his strength, quiet courage, and self-deprecating humor.

“When I was first diagnosed with ALS, I said to myself, ‘why me?’” remembers Bill, sharing thoughts of a darker time, several years ago. “But then I came to my group

here at the VA, where there are so many people who are a lot worse off. I started saying to myself, 'why not me?' and 'what am I going to make of this life?' I didn't want to just waste it lying in bed. I had a lot of life to live, and I had things to share."

And share he did. Bill is the longest participating member of a very large and robust group of Veterans who have come to the VA for more than a decade, to discuss whatever is on their minds. This group has covered a lot of ground over the years. From emotional anguish, to physical pain, there is nothing off limits. And to the participants in this group, Bill is a quiet leader. In the face of adversity, he inspires them to be strong. When things get emotional, the group will remind one another, evoking his inspiration: "Dude, chill like Bill."

"Bill never comes here, with a bad attitude," said Ron Hare, the group member who first coined the phrase, 'chill like Bill.' "Sometimes he's quiet, but he always listens and stays engaged. It can get rough with lots of emotion. When we come around the room to Bill, we look forward to it. He always has something humorous to say. It sort of puts things into perspective. With all he's going through, he just keeps cool, he keeps his head up, and he's there for us. That's how I came up with the phrase. I wanted to learn to handle my problems more like Bill. I think we can all be better off if we can learn to 'chill like Bill.'"

The group's staff leader is Psychologist, Kris Martin. He is the third organizer of this group in the 14 years that Bill has been coming. "We come together to discuss some pretty emotional things," said Martin, "From military experiences, to issues at home, or work. It can get intense. Bill participates and helps bring consensus. He gives others the credit for keeping him going, and they all give him credit for keeping them going. It's a very supportive relationship and it's both unique and inspiring – Vets helping Vets – it's an amazing thing to see."

On this particular visit, I am an invited guest of the group. I look around the small room, packed to the brim with 20 men, of various ages. American heroes of every conflict since the Korean War. Every man in the group is wearing the same T-shirt. The shirt is simple, Khaki in color, with the phrase, "Chill Like Bill," in lime green lettering.

It's an attractive shirt with a catchy and meaningful reminder, but there is another reason these Veterans are showing off their shirts. As all of them will tell you, Veterans helping Veterans is a legacy from their days in the military, when the man (or woman) to your left and right, had your back – your very life – in their hands. Along those lines, they wanted to show their support for the physical pains of their emotional leader. They pooled their money, bought the Chill Like Bill shirts, and they are selling them to raise money for ALS research. So far they are making about 6 dollars per shirt, all of which is going to the ALS foundation.

"It's hard to say where this will go," explained Dr. Martin, "But in a world that often leaves us feeling somewhat powerless, these men are making a strong statement about their affection for their comrade and they are putting their time and money into the effort. To say they inspire me, would be an understatement. I consider myself very fortunate to be involved with such a solid group of guys. They are all heroes to me."

Editor's Note: If you are interested in buying a CHILL LIKE BILL shirt to support ALS research, contact Dr. Kristopher Martin at the James J. Peters VA, 718.584.9000, ext. 3415

Photo to follow....



Dr, Kristopher Martin (l) and Veteran, Bill Crain

For more information related to this story, or the James J. Peters VA Medical Center, please contact Jim Connell, Public Affairs Officer, at 718.584.9000, ext. 6620

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