

Desert Magazine

MAY 2007

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HEALTH & WELLNESS ISSUE

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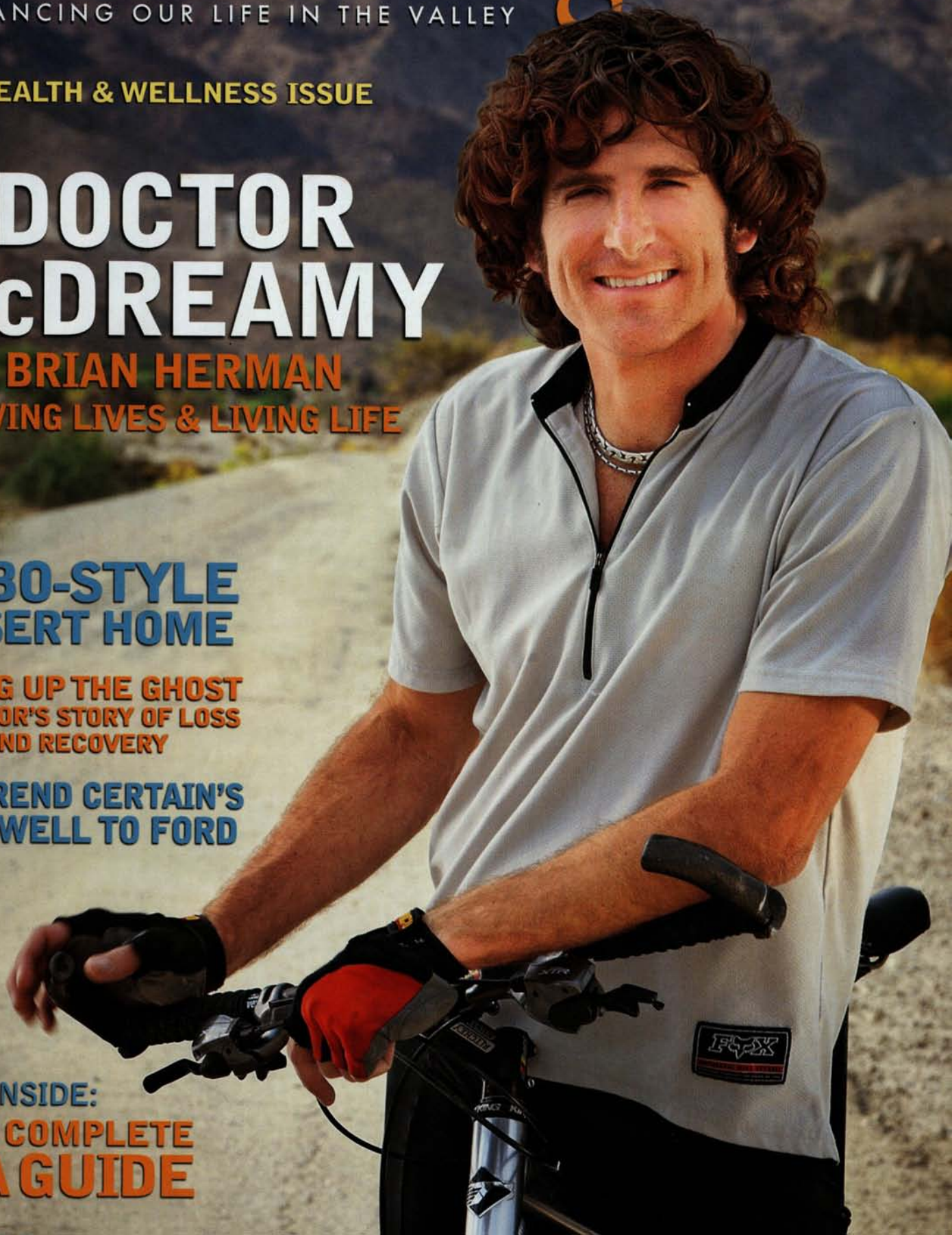
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A FAREWELL TO FORD

REVEREND ROBERT CERTAIN'S NATIONAL LEGACY

BY JUDITH SALKIN

In January, the Rev. Robert Certain found himself on somewhat unfamiliar ground. As parish priest at St. Margaret's Episcopal Church in Palm Desert, he had been the pastor to President Gerald R. Ford for eight years and came to national attention as he led funeral services here in Palm Desert, at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. and at Ford's Presidential Library in Grand Rapids, Mich.

He comforted Mrs. Ford and the family and carried out the series of funeral events with the confidence born of years of planning. All of this was done within days of his own planned retirement from his position at St. Margaret's. It put an unexpected, but poignant end to his tenure at the church.



Reverend Robert G. Certain (lower left) at President Ford's funeral.

CERTAIN'S UNCERTAIN FUTURE

In early March, Certain's life faced an uncertain future. He retired on Jan. 7, he says, "without knowing what comes next." And later accepted the interim rector position with Saint Peter & Saint Paul Episcopal Church in Marietta, Ga., and led Easter services on April 8. He would also interview with the Director of Presidential Personnel in May about an appointment to a board or commission dealing with veterans issues. But, for the first time in his life, life held unknown possibility but not certainty.

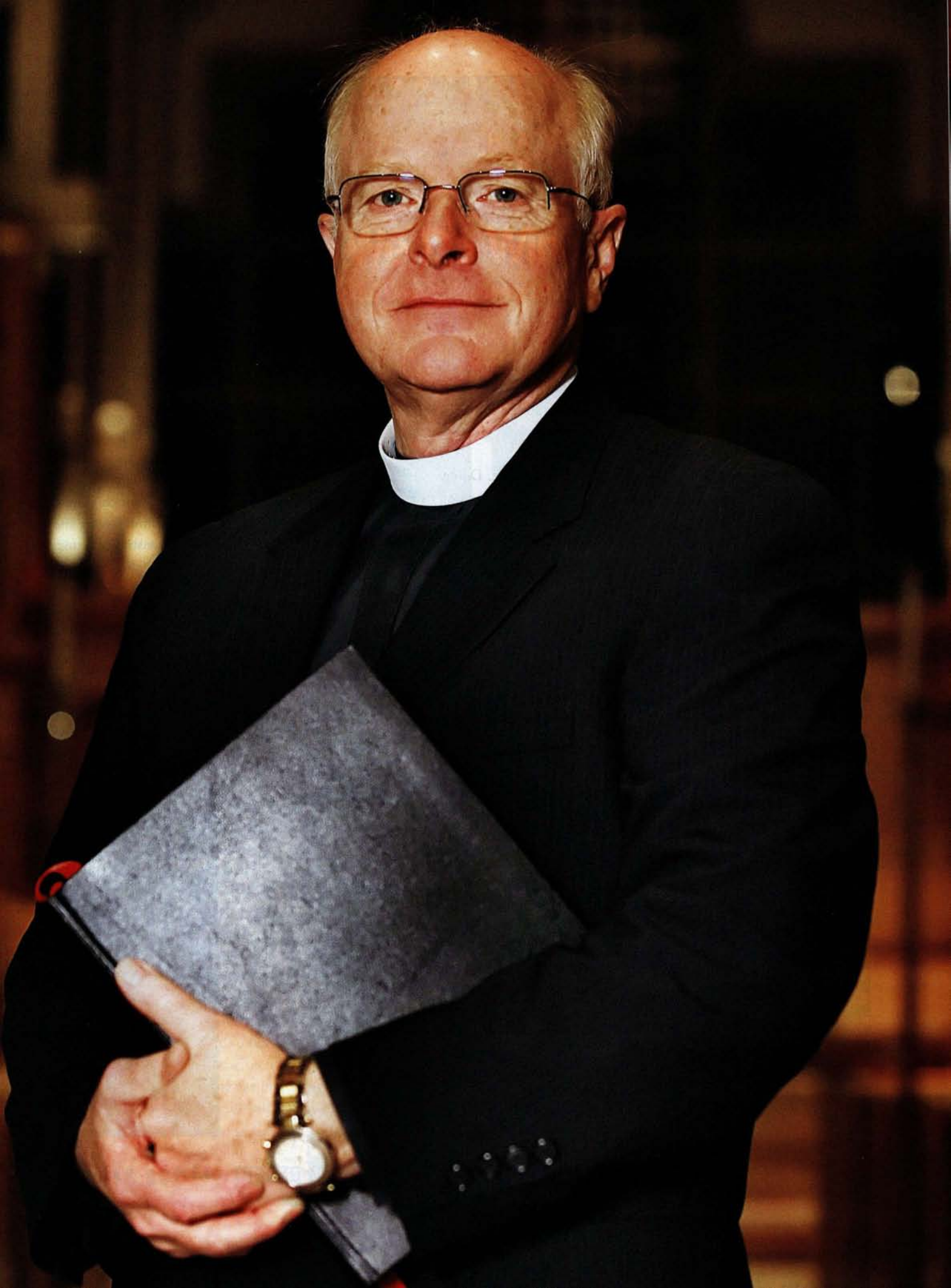
"Plan A," he said in March would be to "work as an interim minister, hopefully in central Texas" to be near his grown children and their families. "Plan B was working with Veterans Affairs," he says.

His idea is to help returning vets to adjust to civilian life, including making sure that they receive access to mental health care to make that transition smoother, and follow-ups to try and short-circuit post-traumatic stress disorder that many service men and women suffer through after being in combat. Certain knows whereof he speaks.

"I'm a unique asset," he says. "I flew 100 combat missions in Vietnam and spent 100 days as a prisoner of war." He also has more than 30 years of both active and reserve service in the Air Force. "And I was ordained as a parish priest 31 years ago."

BLACK NIGHT INTO LIGHT

Robert Certain has been to that black night where those vets have been, and he's made it back to the light. But it was a nearly



20-year struggle that he recounts in his recently published book, "Unchained Eagle: From Prisoner of War To Prisoner of Christ."

The book tells his story. During Vietnam, USAF Capt. Robert Certain was a B-52 navigator who ended up spending 100 days in the infamous Hanoi Hilton as a prisoner of war.

Following Vietnam, he turned his life to Christ and found meaning by becoming an Episcopal priest. But even that spiritual calling couldn't calm his depression.

"I didn't realize it at the time, but every year from Advent to Easter, I'd start to get depressed and irritable," Certain says. "I didn't put it together, and neither did therapists, but those dates were the bookends to my incarceration in Hanoi."

"In World War I, it was called 'shell shock,' and in World War II and Korea, it was 'battle fatigue,'" he says. In the years after Vietnam, post traumatic stress disorder had taken over, but the results were the same: a delayed reaction to the combat and imprisonment. "Depression is the gift that keeps on giving," he says in a somewhat mocking tone.

He'd tried therapy, a couple of times, but it didn't take. Doing some research on alternative therapies on the Internet in the late 1990s, Certain found information on Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy, a drugless therapy that Certain says can offer remarkable results for patients who respond quickly. It was what he needed to finally put his depression into perspective.

And then Sept. 11 happened. "The book," he says, "got started as a need to come to terms once more with (his own post traumatic stress disorder)."

Now, with what he knows about living with PTSD and depression and what would have helped him, Certain hopes to work with the Department of Defense to develop protocols for returning service personnel. "I've been in touch with both Secretary (Donald) Rumsfeld and Vice President (Dick) Cheney," he says. "And they've both been very helpful."

A NEW PERSPECTIVE

The lasting effect of EMDR therapy helped Certain not only with the stress of Ford's public funeral, but other areas of his life. "I don't get as frustrated," he says with a laugh. Just days before Ford's final flight to Washington, "I had a chronic cough on Dec. 27," he says. On Dec. 28, he didn't have a voice. "I went to the doctor and told him, 'Listen, I've got to preach in a couple of days — what can I do?'"

Before the EMDR treatments, the temporary croaking voice and his wide-open future would have been much more stressful for Certain. "I've never left a position without having another in the wings," he says. "But I don't want to rush things this time."

Whether he works in another church or three over the next five to 10 years, or goes to work with the defense department, he knows he'll continue to work with vets. "There's a big adjust

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Unchained Eagle

From Prisoner of War
To Prisoner of Christ



Robert G. Certain

UNCHAINED EAGLE

BY ROBERT G. CERTAIN

ETC Publications, Palm Springs, Calif.

Available on Amazon.com and in
Peppertree Bookstores, Palm Springs
and La Quinta

when you get out of the service. When you're in combat mode, you have to get macho because you're taught to face down the enemy. And that can cause a lot of mental problems. The Veteran's Administration has gotten a lot better over the years, but there's really no one (entity) coordinating care, checking in every year to see how things are going (with the vets after their return). That's what I can do."

With his new book, "The Spiritual Quest" which is scheduled to be released mid-summer, and, hopefully, a new ministry through the Department of Defense, Certain hopes to bring at least some measure of the peace he's finally found to his brothers and sisters in arms. "Department of Defense is pretty good at seeing the big picture stuff," he says. "I think I can help with other things."

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