A quiet stream runs through a ravine within the campus of Naval Support Activity Bethesda, home of Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. Beneath the trees rises the sweet smell of nature, not car fumes, and a chance to hear birds and other wildlife rustle through the bushes. In this place, called the Green Road, recovering wounded service members, their caregivers and families are able to momentarily escape dwelling on the tragedy of what has happened and the uncertainty that lies ahead.
Before starting the project Sullivan said he tended to take nature for granted. "I don't think I appreciated what it has done for me. I mean I have always lived in a leafy neighborhood. I work on a campus that's an arboretum," he said. But this project "made me aware of how lucky I am. It has made me calm, it allows me to rest. I'm a landscape architect, I should be thinking this all the time. Until working on this I don't think I got into the spiritual part. It takes me out of myself but also feeds me."

The $4 million project is two-pronged in its mission. First is the actual park, the quiet place for respite. Secondly, researchers will be studying 50 service member patients over a two-year period to determine if nature has a positive effect on speeding recovery. "They will be monitoring heart rate, checking on changes in enzymes and recording blood pressure," Sullivan said.

Project administrator for the Green Road Project is Dr. Frederick Foote, a retired U.S. Navy physician who was also a driving force in Walter Reed's "Healing through the Arts" program started in 2000. Foote used visual, musical and language arts to supplement the traditional medical treatment of post traumatic stress and brain injured patients in a holistic approach, not un-
like the garden project.

The lead organization was The Institute for Integrative Health, a nonprofit founded by Dr. Brian Ber-
man, who spent 20 years as a re-
searcher and director of the University of Maryland Center for Integrative Medicine. A mission of the group is to shift the focus from “managing disease to promoting lifelong health,” as well as understanding factors that influence health—like the Green Road Project.

Sullivan said the university’s role in the project came in 2012 when they were invited to participate in a grant proposal through the TKF Founda-
tion in Annapolis. TKF, a nonprofit that has been funding small parks in the mid-Atlantic for the past 20 years,
seeks to bring “more nature closer to the people who need it,” Sullivan said. So far they’ve funded 120 gardens, including on the University’s campus. That garden was created after the terrorist attacks on 9/11 and gives students a place to sit and be reflective. “That garden gets used a lot, it’s really beautiful,” particularly the labyrinth, he said. “In a way because of the campus project I was recommended at Walter Reed.” Sullivan and his people received the grant in 2013, “I jumped at the chance to work on this proj-
and families and the people treating them. Those people also would go there with a lot of stress and we wanted a way for nature to ease their struggle.”

The focus group pointed out other considerations, Sullivan said. “It’s a long way down to the stream. It would be nice to have a rest room. And what about a shelter in case of rain?” Two structures were built, on the high and low elevations and there’s a council ring with eight to ten flat stones in a circle for people to sit—a nod to a tradition from Native Americans.

Visiting the area gives the feeling of “being tucked away” shielded from the outside urban area. Deer, fox and other wildlife share the space and planners purposely chose plants that would feed the birds. Woodland smells are also noticeable, whether it’s the decomposition of fall leaves, fragrant springtime flowers or the distinctive smell of soil after a summer rain. “It’s very subtle but it puts you in a whole different frame of mind,” Sullivan said.

However, “we always assume it will trigger good memories, but you have to think that for some people, especially those with PTS, some of what (they encounter in the park) my get their guard up. You just don’t know, but we’re going to find out through the research,” Sullivan said.

To that point, the garden is a setting unlike the deserts of Iraq or the rugged, rocky terrain of Afghanistan where troops served. Here there is “open structure. There are no tight enclosures, no dead-end pathways, no feeling of being trapped,” he said.

He was able to use two graduate students on the project’s early research, with one of them using the project for her thesis. Sullivan also used some of the funds to hire students to work on drawings. Now that the project has been completed (dedicated in September, 2016) Sullivan takes his students there for learning and inspiration. Additionally, the professor has talked about The Green Road at various conferences including last May in China.

The project “was always in the back of my head” even during his time away from the construction, he recalled. His vigilance proved fortunate when he happened to get wind of the U.S. Navy wanting to take out 50 trees to build a bridge. ‘I said, ‘whoa!’ The Navy said ‘we agree’ so it worked out. We didn’t do a lot of clearing although we did lose some trees that were damaged in the construction…where trees came down we left the logs there. It was rather symbolic, those are our fallen comrades; they are part of the rebuilding.”

Trees in the space include tulip poplars, beech, hickory and oaks. “Fifty years ago it was cultivated as farmland so this is second growth trees. Some are three-feet in diameter,” he said. There’s a high canopy, but also areas where the sun can pour through, bathing the landscape in light. The idea is not to have a well-manicured park, but space just as nature intended. Hope is that just as equally intended, the troubled and injured people who come to this place will find peace and healing.