

Injured Veteran of Dual Service Branches Seeks Help from Wounded Warrior Project **All-Female Mental Health Workshops Bring New Hope to Recovery**

HOUSTON, Nov. 8, 2016 /[PRNewswire-USNewswire](#)/ -- It is estimated that as many as 400,000 service members live with the invisible wounds of war, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injury (TBI), the two signature wounds of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT).

Still, a 2010 study by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) found that of nearly 50,000 GWOT veterans with new PTSD diagnoses, fewer than 10 percent appeared to have received evidence-based VA mental health treatment for PTSD, and 20 percent of those veterans did not have a single mental health follow-up visit in the first year after diagnosis.

Michelle Slaughter, U.S. Marine Corps and Army wounded warrior from Houston, fit this statistic until she was finally diagnosed and treated for both PTSD and a TBI. But it took years of suffering both physically and mentally, and the abrupt end of her military career.

"I deployed to Iraq twice with the Army," Michelle said. "Looking back, I now know there were several issues that triggered my PTSD."

Michelle drew in a deep breath and began to recount the stories from her past that would forever be connected to her future. In her first Army deployment to Tikrit, Iraq, Michelle was a supply service member attached to a military police patrol that was conducting regular missions searching for weapons caches and insurgents. As such, she was exposed to the same hostile insurgents and their improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in her area of operations as the male warriors.

She returned stateside and began a downward spiral. Michelle was unknowingly in the throes of PTSD. Due to the misconception that women warriors do not fill combat roles while serving in forward operations, physical and mental health concerns associated with such experiences were never considered relevant to her treatment.

"I thought I was going crazy – no one stopped to consider that I had invisible wounds. I didn't know what was going on with me," she said.

So instead of seeking treatment, Michelle was again deployed in 2003 to Fallujah, this time attached to a signal battalion that was responsible for setting up and providing all radio communications. She credits her new war zone environment for further masking her symptoms – an area where Michelle dealt with rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) and small arms fire at her base and during convoy missions.

"I felt normal because I was back in the environment that initially gave me PTSD. In a place of war, hypervigilance is expected. In Iraq, my thoughts and emotions made sense."

But when she returned home, Michelle didn't know how to function. A series of exposure to RPGs and blasts left Michelle with a TBI. And she began to have sleep issues – specifically, not wanting to sleep because of the expectation of imminent attack, which, in Iraq, mostly came at night. Night terrors and loud noises began to haunt Michelle, and soon, she was self-medicating.

"If I drank enough, I could fall asleep to a level that I wouldn't dream," Michelle recalled. "I knew something was seriously wrong, but I didn't want to be weak. I didn't want to be a bad soldier or not live up to the warrior ethos. If you went to get treatment for mental health – there was something wrong with you. You were a basket case. You were crazy. But I was told it would be in my best interest to get help."

Michelle represents many injured service members who continue to struggle daily with the aftermath of sacrifices made on the battlefield: physically, mentally, emotionally, financially, and legally. While support and services for the invisible wounds of war have progressed, the need for increased treatment resources is evident. According to the VA, 11-20 percent of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom veterans are diagnosed with PTSD in a given year. These numbers are determined by how the government defines PTSD cases, principally a patient having at least two outpatient visits or one or more hospitalizations during which PTSD was diagnosed.

"When I was finally diagnosed, it helped me know what was wrong, but the available treatment plans – like all the pills – didn't help me cope. Things started going downhill fast, and eventually I was demoted in rank and processed out of the Army due to behavior stemming from my PTSD. To say the least, my transition out of service was much sooner than expected – and it was hard. I had a difficult time fitting in the civilian workforce."

To address the growing mental health needs of warriors returning from war, Wounded Warrior Project® (WWP) created its Combat Stress Recovery Program (CSRP). Through the generous support of donors, WWP offers veterans a range of specialized mental health programs and services – tailored to each warrior's specific needs and free of charge. WWP and its supporters believe warriors already paid their dues on the battlefield.

"I initially sought employment help from Wounded Warrior Project's Warriors to Work® program. They helped me get my foot in the door with potential employers – even purchased a suit for me. Talking with the WWP staff and other veterans helped me realize the severity of my TBI and PTSD injuries."

Michelle started getting involved in WWP's mental health support services. These gatherings are often the first time warriors leave their homes to connect with others in their communities. To make it as comfortable as possible, WWP offers multi-day workshops that are all-male, all-female, or all-couples. These restorative mental health workshops provide safe, private environments for warriors to express themselves and share their combat experiences. By the end, warriors share lessons learned from the activities that impacted their personal struggles most and set achievable goals for their recoveries.

"The mental health workshop empowered me to take my life and story back," Michelle said. "Being among other female combat veterans who have similar experiences and invisible injuries lets me know I am not alone. It's a very safe feeling to have – that no matter what is shared or where you are in your recovery, you will be treated with compassion and understanding because there is no judgment among combat veterans. It's a rewarding experience to attend these events – Wounded Warrior Project has never let me down."

About Wounded Warrior Project

The mission of Wounded Warrior Project® (WWP) is to honor and empower Wounded Warriors. The WWP purpose is to raise awareness and to enlist the public's aid for the needs of injured service members, to help

injured servicemen and women aid and assist each other, and to provide unique, direct programs and services to meet their needs. WWP is a national, nonpartisan organization headquartered in Jacksonville, Florida. To get involved and learn more, visit woundedwarriorproject.org.

Video - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tV6PRv9Pspk>

SOURCE Wounded Warrior Project

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