

AfterAction



WARRIOR PROFILE:

A hand up from Wounded Warrior Project propelled Jessica Coulter into a successful career.



WINTER BLUES:

Keep your spirits up this holiday season with these tips from the WWP combat stress team.



A TALE OF TRIUMPH:

When you first witness Keith Sekora and Chris Wolff in public, it's OK to assume they're either heartless jerks or performers on a hidden camera show



Rob Jones set the tone for his recovery when he was wheeled into Walter Reed wearing a pirate hat.

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A DECADE OF SERVICE.



A LIFETIME OF COMMITMENT.

CONTACT

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For more information about WWP and other veteran resources, email or call us today at or 888.WWP.ALUM (997.2586).

GOT AN IDEA OR COMMENT? editor@woundedwarriorproject.org

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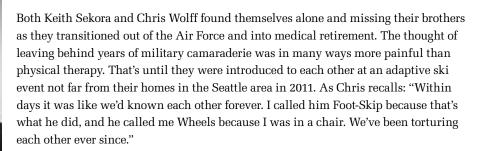
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ENGAGING A GENERATION

Dear Alumnus:

There are few bonds as tight as those forged through military service. Whether standing watch stateside or deployed overseas, service members know they can depend on their brothers and sisters. For many veterans, it's important to find a similar camaraderie in the civilian world, but it's not always that easy.



Wounded Warrior Project® (WWP) recognizes the healing value of bringing together injured service members like Keith and Chris. Under the program pillar of engagement, we've developed six different programs, each meant to keep warriors active in the veteran community and developing new friendships with other injured service members. You can learn more about these programs on our website at woundedwarriorproject.org/programs.aspx.

Within this Winter issue, you'll also find some ways to make your holidays a little more enjoyable. We've got a great mulled cider recipe to warm you up after shoveling snow (page 17), along with some advice on how to handle the extra stress that comes with this time of year (page 7). If you're traveling by air, you'll want to check out our TSA Cares feature to learn how to make the security process easier (page 6).

However you spend this winter season, the WWP family wishes you happy holidays, and we look forward to serving you in the new year.

Executive Director, Wounded Warrior Project

NEWS AND NOTES ★ ★ ★ ★

A new video series commemorating our 10-year anniversary, "Wounded: The Battle Back Home," debuted on MSNBC and other news outlets this Veterans Day. Check out the first installments and share your story on wwp10.org.



Email is one of the most common ways WWP keeps Alumni up to date on regional events and promotions, including our weekly newsletter. "The Post." If you're not receiving emails. check your promo and spam folders. Also, bear in mind that the Army will be closing all AKO accounts for retirees on March 31, 2014. To update your contact information, get in touch with the Resource Center at 888.WWP.ALUM (888.997.2586).



Thirty warriors earned their SCUBA certifications during a Wounded Warrior Project event held at Dutch Spring Aqua Park in Allentown, Pennsylvania.



Dozens of warriors and their families were treated to a weekend of fun sights and activities at the Chicago Air and Water Show.



Warriors and their spouses pose for a picture at Whitaker Point, deep in the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas.



Soldier Ride® is so much more than pedaling cycles. For Jayson Southmayd, it's a way to avoid the excuses he uses so often at home to stay secluded. It's a chance to challenge himself physically and soak up the laughter of new friends and old buddies. "It gave me a break from all the things I'm dealing with," Jayson says about the recent Soldier Ride in Phoenix, Arizona. "I came home refreshed."

Jayson deployed to Iraq in 2009 as an Army combat medic. Providing frontline medical care and evacuating the injured gave him a sense of purpose, but it also exposed him to images and scenes that still replay in his mind. After several rounds of treatment for his post-traumatic stress disorder, Jayson was introduced to his service dog, a golden retriever named Arrabelle. Arrabelle is a constant companion for Jayson and a much-needed distraction for when he feels low. This picture, captured in Frontier Town in Phoenix, perfectly captures their friendship.

WANT TO GET INVOLVED?

Wounded Warrior Project has dozens of events going on around the country. **Learn how to get involved on page 25.**

WARRIOR ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Wounded Warrior Project recently debuted a new pilot program called Warrior Assistance Program. The program is intended to fill gaps in service from government sources and provide more immediate support to the daily issues in veterans' lives. One of the most popular services offered through Warrior Assistance Program is mental health counseling for both individuals and couples. The free and confidential counseling is offered on a weekly basis or at the warrior's convenience through therapists who are familiar with military culture. A wide network of providers means that Alumni typically do not have to travel far to take advantage of this offer, or they can elect to participate in counseling over the phone.

Raymond Bennett spent an hour in a park recently, seemingly one of dozens of other people enjoying the Colorado summer. But for Raymond this was a breakthrough. "Little assignments like that have coaxed me out of the house," says Raymond, an Army veteran who until recently experienced high anxiety every time he stepped outside. The assignment was from Raymond's therapist, who has been helping Raymond cope with the emotional turmoil resulting from four deployments to Iraq. Raymond found his therapist through the Warrior Assistance Program and has benefited from consistent, weekly appointments over the past three months. His last attempt at counseling was through his local VA hospital, and those appointments were every four to five months.

The weekly appointments have given Raymond someone to talk to and new energy to face each new day.

"Mentally, it has calmed me down some. I'm not as depressed," Raymond says. "My anxiety has definitely dropped."

Apart from mental health counseling, Alumni enrolled in WAP can take advantage of many other services. Regardless of what service you choose, the end goal is not just to patch a problem, but to create sustainable progress with goals and long-term solutions for the issues you're facing.



Need help getting your finances in order? Want advice on living within your means? WAP counselors can help you draft a monthly financial plan, as well as help you take steps to repair your credit.



Make your New Year's resolution stick this year with health-related tips from WAP counselors. Whether it's tips on quitting smoking, finding a gym in your neighborhood, or dropping pounds, WAP has what you need to get fit in 2014.



If you're living under the shadow of a DUI or a bankruptcy, WAP can help you make sense of the consequences and offer some solutions you might not know about. Some of the other legal counsel offered includes help with adoption.

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

To learn more about Warrior Assistance Program, and enroll, call the WWP Resource Center at WWP.ALUM (997.2586) or contact wap@woundedwarriorproject.org.

Beyond Worry

When it got to the point where Jessica Coulter could not buy groceries for herself and her two sons, she knew it was time to ask for help.

Until then, Jessica didn't want to look for a handout. She was an Air Force veteran but was never wounded in combat, so she didn't feel worthy of turning to the Veterans Affairs hospital.

But when a VA social worker heard her story — a single mother, unable to find a steady job, dealing with stress and anxiety — she was handed a Wal-Mart gift card from Wounded Warrior Project (WWP) to help buy food.

"I couldn't believe it," she said. "I had no money, no child support, and here they were wanting to help me."

The help from WWP in 2010 began with a gift card, but it grew into a way for Jessica to understand herself and her struggles. It helped her realize how a sexual assault in 2000 that she never reported was really affecting her daily life.

The assault happened one year after joining the Air Force, when Jessica and her friends at Scott Air Force Base in Illinois threw a barbeque to celebrate the weekend.

Jessica said a friend, who was a military police officer, sexually assaulted her in her barracks room. It brought on a flood of guilt, confusion, and resentment. She wanted to tell her supervisor, but after witnessing the treatment of other sexual assault victims, it didn't seem possible.

"I felt like I couldn't tell him what happened, because he'd say it was my fault," Jessica said. "There were a lot of accusations of sexual assault at the time, and you'd hear stories of the treatment of the women. I didn't see a way around it."

Despite the trauma, Jessica completed one overseas deployment to Saudi Arabia in 2000, married in 2001, and gave birth to two sons. She moved into the reserves in 2007 and left the military in 2009.

The stress from a frequent-deployment tempo and Jessica's anxiety from her untreated trauma led to separation and ultimately divorce from her husband. When she moved back to her hometown of Newport, Rhode Island, Jessica struggled with confusion, anxiety, and difficulty keeping a job. Without steady income, she came close to homelessness.

After she turned to the VA for help, WWP continued to support her recovery in a variety of ways. While the path was laid out for her, Jessica recognized it was up to her to take the next steps.

"It's a hand up, not a handout," she said. "It all started with the gift cards and the Christmas help, but what they really did is help me learn how to advocate for myself and be OK."

After enrolling as a WWP Alumnus in 2011, Jessica traveled to Chicago for a Dirty Girl Mud Run. There she met other women, whose stories of assault in the military were just like hers.

"That was the first time I heard other stories of women who were sexually assaulted and didn't get help," she said. "I wasn't alone."

Through talking with fellow veterans and therapists, Jessica realized the last decade of struggles — from not being able to hold a job to anxiety to money problems — all were related to the undiagnosed post-traumatic stress of her assault.

Jessica stayed active as an Alumna, and WWP helped with things like understanding the new G.I. Bill and résumé writing to get her professional life on track. WWP also supplied her with a peer mentor so she would have another female vet to call when she felt overwhelmed, Alumni events like ski trips to build up her confidence, and the Warrior Assistance Program to guide her through different legal obstacles.

Now raising her two boys, Emmanuel, 10, and Tyrone, 11, Jessica teaches yoga at the Naval Undersea Warfare Center and specialty classes at various yoga studios in Newport.

She also practices spoken word poetry, and uses her story to inspire others through art.

"It's about helping you learn more so you can move beyond the worries, physical or mental, and just live your life," she said.



HOLIDAY TRAVEL

The words "airport security" give most travelers the shivers, especially in the context of the busy holiday season. For many veterans, security presents extra obstacles, including increased anxiety in crowds, close inspections of pill bottles and CPAP machines, personal questions about service dogs, and myriad internal metal parts to set off the scanner. To relieve some of the worry and hassle, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has created an alternative screening measure called TSA Cares. TSA Cares is for travelers with disabilities and medical conditions who need help passing through security.

Alumnus Richard Raines, a retired Air Force staff sergeant living near Miami, Florida, uses the TSA Cares option every time he travels.

Here's what he has to say about TSA Cares:

"The difference between using TSA Cares and going in the regular line is like night and day. You have supervisors by your side, and I found them to be caring and understanding. While I deal with avoidance issues and physically cannot stand too long, the supervisors don't ask too much. They just clear you."

TSA encourages people to call the airport at least 72 hours before traveling, and Richard echoes that suggestion. On occasion, though, he's missed a flight or notified TSA curbside at the airport and they will still accommodate him if a supervisor is requested as soon as possible, Richard says.

Richard wholeheartedly endorses TSA Cares:

"They're really doing as much as they can," Richard says.



If you're interested in special traveling assistance or have questions about screening policies and procedures, call TSA Cares toll free at 1.855.787.2227. The TSA Cares help line is open Monday through Friday, 8 am - 11 pm EST, and weekends and holidays, 9 am - 8 pm EST. You can also email them at TSA-ContactCenter@dhs.gov. For more information, visit tsa.gov or scan the QR code with your smartphone.



WINTER

large crowds, visiting families, and financial strains are enjoyable experience.

Ready or not, the holiday season is upon us. The amplified just some of the stressors the holiday season can bring stress this season brings can make enjoying the holidays about. However, with a little extra planning, and the use of a challenge for veterans and their families. Bright lights, some of the tips provided below, your holidays can be an



. STRATEGIZE YOUR HOLIDAYS:

Decide in advance who you want to see, what you want to do, how much you want to spend, and where you want to go. Plan your activities, maximizing time with the people who are good for you, and try to keep a regular schedule. Decide now what you feel you can spend on the holidays, and adhere to that budget. This will help reduce the after-holiday stress as well



Remember that no one has the "perfect" family, and there is no such thing as a "perfect holiday." Enjoy the little things that make this holiday season special to you and your family, and try not to set



3. HAVE AN ESCAPE PLAN:

You can't always anticipate how you're going to feel or how you might react in a situation. Make a backup plan with your closest support system so that you're ready in case you need to make a quick getaway. Develop a code word, or an excuse to leave without creating a scene.



4. REMEMBER "ME" TIME:

In the hustle and bustle of the holidays, remember to carve out a little personal time to allow you to decompress and regroup. Schedule your alone time into your day, so you stick to it. Take a walk with your dog, maintain a workout regimen, try yoga or meditation, or spend a few



5. MAINTAIN YOUR PRIVACY:

Managing PTSD or other injuries during the holidays doesn't require full disclosure to everyone you know. It's all right to decline an invitation or say no without a full explanation. The people you trust and love will know the reasons, but for others a simple "No, thank you" is enough.



6. PTSD AND THE HOLIDAYS:

The holiday season can be a difficult and emotional time for those dealing with PTSD, and things like anniversaries and survivors' guilt can make it even harder to enjoy. Try to focus on the positives around you: visualize the progress you've made, write down your strengths, do things you enjoy with family and friends. Have someone else in your life who can also remind you of these positives. However, if you find yourself struggling with PTSD, depression, suicidal thoughts, or other symptoms, please reach out for help. The Veterans Crisis Line is available 24/7 at 800.273.8255 (press 1).

To learn more tips on handling stress and hear real warriors talk about their coping techniques, visit restorewarriors.org.



STARTING WEIGHT: 220

WEIGHT TODAY: 160

BRANCH OF SERVICE: U.S. Army

SPECIALTY: Ranger

CURRENT LOCATION:Sykesville, Maryland

John Rego is frank about what he considers the perfect exercise: "I love doing workouts that suck." On any given weekday, he could be running long distance, flipping tires, Olympic lifting in the gym, or using a sledgehammer to punish a rubber block. The hard work and careful diet has paid off for this former Ranger,who has lost about 60 pounds over the past 18 months. But it was a long road to get here.

John was reluctant to participate when he first learned about the WWP Under Armour workout in Baltimore, Maryland. At the time, he was on heavy medication and still recovering from the trauma of a building collapse in Iraq. He was also living with anxiety and combat stress from the aftermath of war.

The workout completely changed his perspective on what was physically possible in his future. John went home inspired and started his own exercise regimen. In the beginning it was a handful of pushups, one pathetic pull-up, and a couple of sit-ups by his bedside. But he stuck with it and incorporated running into his weekly exercise.

As he gained strength, John also attended a wellness class through WWP, which introduced him to a whole new way of eating. Today, John's diet focuses on foods high in healthy fats and low in carbs, with an emphasis on natural ingredients. He avoids processed foods, sugar, dairy, legumes, and breads, in favor of wild-caught fish and organic vegetables and fruits.

The exercise and diet have improved not only John's health, but his outlook on life, too.

"The new John Rego is extremely positive, especially compared to who I was nine years ago," John says. "I really want to spread the word to other veterans so they can feel better, too."

Check out more pictures of John's workout at: http://www.woundedwarriorproject.org/aar-exclusive.aspx



HIGH JUMPS

High jumps are a great way to build your leg muscles, increase agility, and develop explosive speed. John uses these old tires, which he can incorporate into other workouts. But anything higher than your knees is a candidate for high jumps, from a sturdy box to steps.



SLEDGE-HAMMER SLAMS

Today, John can knock out five sets of 20 sledgehammer drops on these old tractor tires. But it took a long time to build up to that, John says. John started out with an eight-pound sledgehammer and about 10 reps for each side of his body, then upgraded to a 16-pound sledgehammer. The workout engages the shoulder and chest muscles, along with the core.



CHOP WOOD, CARRY WATER

In keeping with his organic, versatile style, John's workout usually consists of whatever strikes him as fun that day. For instance, John mixes it up every now and then by combining the sledgehammer blows with carrying these flat-bottomed 50-pound weights. He previously used five-gallon water jugs. His name for the workout: chopping wood, carrying water.



TIRE FLIPS

John has several different workouts he uses with these old tractor tires, from stacking them to flipping them over in succession. If there's a hill nearby, John will also roll them up and down the summit. Big tires might be hard to come by. John suggests searching in used-tire shops or farm supply stores or increasing reps with a smaller tire.



DIET

Good fuel is a must with frequent exercise. John's diet today focuses on natural ingredients and avoids processed foods. A typical meal is this lettuce wrap, which features romaine lettuce as a platform for peppers, carrots, garlic, onion, and trout seared in coconut oil. The wrap also includes sliced avocado dipped in balsamic vinegar.

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hen you first witness Keith Sekora and Chris Wolff in public, it's OK to assume they're either heartless jerks or performers on a hidden camera show.

A couple of years ago, Chris — just out of a wheelchair and re-learning how to walk gingerly placed one forearm crutch in front of the other as he made his way toward the cashier to pay his tab at a restaurant. Keith followed behind, dragging his foot on the paralyzed left side of his body.

And then it happened in front of everyone: Chris dropped his keys.

"I see Chris trying to bend over and pick up the keys with his crutch," remembers Keith. "So I grabbed the keys and dangled them in front of him."

"Thanks, Foot-Skip," Chris said.

"You're welcome, Wheels," Keith replied with a devious grin, right before he tossed the keys across the restaurant's floor. "Now, go pick them up with your hands. You're not a cripple! And if you try to pick them up with your crutch again, I'm going to throw them even further."

Chris, only 5-foot-6, wasn't surprised by the act or his friend's tough love ways. He hobbled over, picked up the keys with his hands, and hollered back over to the 6-foot-6 Keith: "Lucky for you I'm lower to the ground, you tall drink of water!"

Some patrons nervously laughed. Some held their breath. The tension broke when Keith dragged himself over to Chris and gave him a hug. All around them came the sound of applause.

"We've earned the right to push each other things, a flu shot. beyond our limits," Chris explains. "We both know what it's like to be told you're going to die."

adies and gentlemen, kiss your ass goodbye." That's what the pilot of the Lockheed C-130 Hercules said to Chris and the rest of the crew after a rocket-propelled grenade bounced off the wing and exploded in mid-air, shattering all the windows.

"I accepted it; I was going to die in the sky over Iraq," remembers Chris. "I was the lead technician and flying mechanic, but there was nothing I could do. Thankfully, the pilot was able to limp the aircraft back to base."



After that near-death experience, the irony of ironies is that Chris was later almost killed by, of all

"Nineteen days after getting the live virus vaccine, I was paralyzed from the neck down. The virus infected my spinal cord and worked its way up to my brain, creating 42 dead spots."

The doctor's prognosis was blunt: "You will never breathe, eat, walk, or do anything on your own ever again."

Chris had other ideas about his fate.

"I lay there in that hospital bed for months, thinking every single moment: Move, you stupid arm, move!" Chris remembers.

Nothing happened at first, but three months later Chris's hand shifted a quarter inch. Slowly he regained movement, inch by inch, up his arm.

It was a slow process, "but I was proving to everyone and to myself that I wasn't dead," Chris says.

eith says his brush with death felt more like someone hit him in the back with a baseball bat.

While on a mission with his explosive ordnance team, Keith was struck in the back, most likely by an enemy bullet. The force knocked him to the ground, along with the live warhead he was handling.

"I was certain that thing would explode in my hands," Keith recalls. The mine did not explode, which both Keith and Chris excel. Their team however, and the medic could not find an entry or exit wound from the bullet. "He told me no blood, no foul. I was hurting, but I was good to go."

Thirty-two hours later, however, the result of the blow was finally revealed. In rapid succession, Keith had four major strokes and 18 mini-strokes. Clots were flowing to his brain like salmon upstream.

Again, doctors were bleak. Every sentence from their mouths started with "You'll never . . . you won't . . . you can't."

"I wasn't as stubborn and hopeful as Chris was," says Keith. "I went from running and gunning to not being able to stand without falling over. I was in a 'woe is me' phase, and I didn't want to live."

Keith returned home with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), memory loss, vertigo, and loss of feeling on the left side of his body.

It wasn't until Keith met Chris and experienced the power of their brotherhood that he finally started to accept his new normal.

hris and Keith constantly razz one another. Spend some time with them and each one will tell you he's smarter, faster, stronger, and sexier than the other. But they're just as likely to get serious about their friendship and how it's a bond that helps them heal and progress.

"We met at an adaptive sports clinic in August 2011," says Chris. "Within days it was like we'd known each other forever. I called him Foot-Skip because that's what he did, and he called me Wheels because I was in a chair. We've been torturing each other ever since."

Keith adds: "Having someone on your side who is going through exactly what you're going through, it makes all the difference. Besides, I can't stand it when the little guy beats me in anything." "He's just jealous because I'm the better volleyball player," Chris retorts. "I'm much better in the back of the net."

"You're just lucky my TBI keeps me from remembering all the bad shots you've made," Keith fires back. "I'm much better in the front of the net."

Truth be told, seated volleyball is a sport in won a medal in the 2012 Warrior Games. Keith even competed against England's Prince Harry in a match in 2013.

"The Prince sat on his butt and battled like the rest of us," says Keith. "He's got some game, but unlike me, he can feel the left side of his body. So he's got an advantage. Regardless, I could still take him on."

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daptive sports have helped both Chris and Keith regain their zest for life. Each man says it helps him see past any limitations their injuries may impose.

In 2012, they participated in the Seattle Marathon Run for Remembrance, a 5K event in honor of those who died or were wounded in operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"We were the only two disabled people doing it," says Keith. "I was in my adaptive bike, and Chris was in his wheelchair. We tethered them together. I pulled him up the hills, and he coasted down on his own."

can be alone," adds Chris. "Keith is a warrior, a survivor, a brother, and a best friend."

Using their individual strengths to push each other turns small efforts into big returns for Chris and Keith.

"I went from being told I'd be in a constant vegetative state to now progressing to where I can walk over 300 feet on my own," says Chris. "I feel there is nothing I can't do, but I didn't always feel that way. Keith has instilled that positive attitude within me."

ealing from such traumatic injuries is not a linear process. Sometimes you take one step forward and two steps back. Yet the power of two goes a long way in fixing all the missteps.

"Seeing Keith change showed me I can change," says Chris. "I'm not sure if I ever really believed I'd be able to send a signal from my brain to my arms, or stand on my own, or walk up stairs, much less ski down a mountain. But I've done them all and I'd do anything for this guy."

That's why Chris made it a point to do everything in his power to be at Keith's wedding this summer.

"Keith and Andrea were married in Hawaii. It was a small wedding, but I wanted to be there. I wanted to walk on the beach with them and share the special day. So at a moment's notice, I went there to be a part of it. I'll never forget the look of surprise on his face when he saw me there."

"That's because you weren't invited," jokes Keith. And with that, Chris is practically on the floor

laughing, his eyes tearing with joy at how easily his friend can lighten the mood.

Yet, just as suddenly, Keith wants to get serious.

"He won't let me go back to being depressed and rotting on the couch," says Keith. "And I'll light a fire under him when he gets down. Sure, we bust on each other all the time. Through the laughter and smiles you show love and respect."

With the chemistry of a duo who are in tune with each other's thoughts, Foot-Skip and Wheels say they want to help their fellow injured warriors transition to a better life.

"It's time for us to go from being that warrior on the "That kind of teamwork is stronger than each man top," Keith starts to say in reference to the Wounded Warrior Project logo . . .

> "To being that warrior on the bottom," Chris says, finishing the sentence. "We might not be able to do it your way. But we'll do it our way. And our way just might be better."



Wounded Warrior Project offers six programs under our engagement pillar, which promotes bonding between warriors and gets them active and plugged into community events.



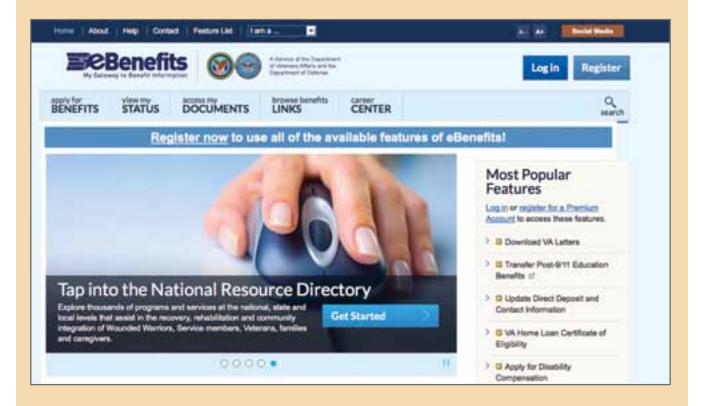


Asked & Answered

- 1. What is eBenefits? eBenefits is a joint Veterans Affairs and Department of Defense website that grants service members, veterans, and their families online access to research and manage their VA and military benefits to include personal information.
- 2. Can I acquire VA letters from eBenefits? Yes, eBenefits has the capability to allow you to download and print VA letters for proof of income, home loan certificates, and proof-of-service letters
- 3. Can I submit a claim through eBenefits? Yes, the VA recommends that you submit your claim electronically. This will give you immediate confirmation of receipt of your claim by the Department of Veterans Affairs. This feature also allows you to submit additional evidence in support of your pending claim(s).
- 4. What other access will I have through eBenefits? Veterans may view the status of pending claims, appeals, and previous claims. You can review your VA pay history, sign up for Veteran's Group Life Insurance, search for a representative or organization to assist you with VA benefits, and

request a copy of your DD214, to highlight a few of the numerous functions available to you.

- 5. How does this site help me if I am still on active duty? It will enable you to view DoD Tricare health insurance, including Tricare Reserve Select. Active duty personnel will have the capability to transfer Post/911 GI Bill benefits to their eligible dependents. It also provides utilization of the eLearning Center for the online Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and so much more.
- 6. Will my family members have access to eBenefits, and if so, what actions can they perform on eBenefits? Yes, they will have limited access to allow them to perform status checks on claims, view enrollment status for Post/911 GI Bill, check VA pay history, and obtain health information via the eLearning Center.
- How do I register? Visit www.ebenefits.va.gov and click Register. There are two types of accounts, but the VA recommends opening a premium account to take advantage of all the aforementioned capabilities. eBenefits is free and costs you nothing to enroll.



WWP IN YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD: NASHVILLE



Teammates: 10

Location: 223 Rosa L. Parks Ave., Suite 301

Nashville, TN 37203

615.782.7226

Fun facts: Team Nashville is dedicated to serving warriors in Kentucky, Tennessee, and Missouri from its home base in the country music capital of the world. The team enjoys outdoor activities, sharing time with each other, and growing as a team. As alumni manager Tim Coop puts it: "We're excited to be here and help veterans in the South reach their full potential through WWP programs and services."





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Act of Love

They first met as soldiers.

"My first impression of her was as a peer, a good Army officer," Kevin Polosky says of his wife, Christina, whom he met in the summer of 2002 when they were both attending the logistics captains course. He had no idea he would marry Christina someday. Neither was he aware of the great joys, terrible sorrows, and life lessons



waiting for him in his future with Christina. What he did know was that this was a soldier with a future he wanted to stay connected with.

They parted ways after the class, but stayed in touch by email. Christina deployed to Iraq for the invasion the next year as a battle captain and Kevin followed a year later as a company commander. Christina's job was performed mostly out of the back of a Humvee, while Kevin had an established forward operating base.

As Kevin puts it: "I was there longer, but her time in Iraq was tougher than my time there."

While their relationship remained professional, Christina sent Kevin a care package with a little Christmas tree as a token of their developing friendship. That "touch of home in the sandbox" was much appreciated and prompted Kevin to connect with Christina in person after they were both stateside again.

That's when they discovered a bond that had nothing to do with work. What they really loved was competition. It didn't matter whether it was running 5K races together, playing golf, Wii bowling or Ultimate Frisbee. Competition with each other fueled them.

"I learned quickly Christina was one of those people who simply had to win, no matter what sport it was, and I greatly admired that" Kevin says.

In 2005, while driving to Fort Irwin in California, they decided on a whim to stop in Las Vegas to get married at the Graceland Chapel of Love. It was a second marriage for both, so "we thought maybe if we got to Elvis to help us out this time it would stick," Kevin says with a laugh.

Three years later, both Kevin and Christina were deployed to Afghanistan when Christina developed an allergic reaction. Doctors are still puzzled by what



triggered the reaction, but it only grew worse with time. First her face and tongue swelled up, then she lost her sight. Finally, Christina couldn't breathe and collapsed in a life-threatening anaphylactic shock. Kevin vividly recalls that night.

"I got really scared. I was trying to figure out how to keep her breathing, to keep her talking," says Kevin, "I was pleading with her. Praying. Yelling for someone to come help us."

Christina was immediately medevaced to Landstuhl, Germany, and eventually sent home. While she's recovered to a certain extent, her immune system was massively compromised by a still unknown contaminant. Today she is confined to bed two to three days a week, experiencing severe muscular and joint pain, debilitating fatigue, severe skin disorders on her hands and feet, cognitive issues, and bouts of deep depression.

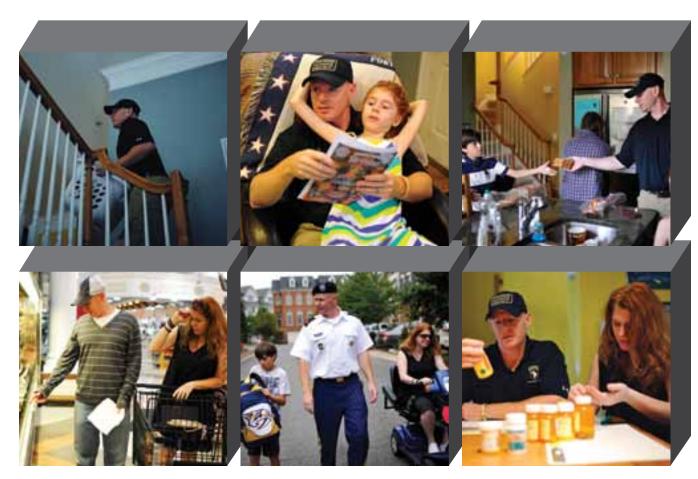
Kevin did not handle the changes well at first.

"I got really angry with my wife for getting hurt," Kevin says, frankly, "It was a really hard place to be in." Then he realized those feelings weren't helping anybody. "I realized I needed to stop feeling sorry for myself and stop being upset for something she had nothing to do with. She's still my wife. She's still the person I'm in love with."

Acceptance is part of the solution, but it doesn't ease the workload of a caregiver. Kevin remains active duty and now juggles his work at the Pentagon, his family, and his care for Christina. While the schedule is often demanding, Kevin says years of experience and a better relationship with God have given him the patience and wisdom to handle it.

"You have to do what needs to get done," says Kevin. "There are no 'roles' anymore."

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Like many caregivers, Kevin had to choose whether to keep his full-time career or stay at home with his spouse. In choosing to stay in the workplace, Kevin's day starts before sunrise every day and ends late at night as he handles the competing demands of father, caregiver, husband, and Army officer.

Kevin also found tremendous help from a caregiver support group and Wounded Warrior Project (WWP). Kevin also found tremendous help from a caregiver support group and Wounded Warrior Project (WWP). There are not many male caregivers out there, so having that small pool of other men who can relate and provide feedback makes a world of difference, Kevin says. For Christina, the support from WWP has been critical because it recognizes the needs of female veterans, regardless of their injury.

"It's a huge thing for her," says Kevin, "to know there are other women who are suffering, too, and that her service is appreciated."

It's difficult looking back at the hopes and dreams they had at the beginning of their relationship and realizing that some will never come to pass. After a few years in limbo, however, Christina and Kevin are finding new things to appreciate as a couple. Christina, for instance, has found a purpose and a talent in art. She began attending painting classes and has found it so therapeutic that she's now planning on teaching art to other female veterans.

"We understand the problems much better than we did five years ago and we have solutions that make everybody happy," Kevin says. "That's a good thing."

If you are a family member or caregiver of an injured service member, you are eligible for a wide range of benefits and programs from Wounded Warrior Project. Learn more at **woundedwarriorproject.org/programs/family-support.aspx**.

THE BEST MEDICINE

Rob Jones has long known the value of a good joke. As squad leader in Afghanistan, he assigned each of his Marines a comedic impression they had to perform on command.

"I had this Latino kid do a Sean Connery in the back of a seven-ton truck as we rode in the rain," Rob says, laughing. "It was really bad, but we used it to keep morale up."

There's a big difference, though, between entertaining friends in the barracks and standing in a spotlight before some of the biggest names in comedy. Rob quickly discovered this when he participated in a stand-up comedy documentary supported by Wounded Warrior Project (WWP). The documentary, "Comedy Warriors: Healing through Humor," allowed him and four other injured warriors to hone their stand-up chops with comedians such as Zach Galifianakis and Bob Saget before performing live in Los Angeles clubs.

"It definitely makes you nervous," Rob says. "I was always joking with my friends, but it's more nerve-wracking with other people."

Rob's journey to the stage began when he started writing his jokes down after his first deployment to Iraq. He was inspired after reading comedian Steve Martin's autobiography and committed to broadening his style.

"Steve didn't want to be one type of comedian or tell one type of joke. He just wanted to do funny stuff," Rob says. "I also decided to do a little bit of everything. Whatever strikes me as funny that day is my material."

Rob deployed again in 2010, this time to Afghanistan, where he continued route clearance missions as a combat engineer. On July 22, he stepped on an improvised explosive device and sustained injuries that would lead to the amputation of both legs.

Even in his drugged state en route to Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Rob woke up long enough to request a funny hat before landing stateside.

"I wanted to get a funny hat, for my mom," Rob explains. "If I was wearing a funny hat, she would see my legs, then the hat, and she couldn't help but laugh and put herself in a good mood."

The strange juxtaposition between a severely injured warrior in a hospital bed and the pirate hat perched on his head certainly makes for a memorable image. It was also an early sign that Rob was

committed to staying positive through the months of rehabilitation and transition that lay ahead.

"I realized pretty quick I wasn't going to pick my legs up and staple them back on," Rob says. "It's an irreversible thing, so it's better not to waste time being depressed and just move on."

Part of Rob's rehabilitation included cycling and a rowing machine. The latter in particular interested Rob and he discovered a club in the Washington, D.C. area that taught Paralympic-style rowing. With no knees, Rob's rowing power comes all from his upper body. Rob's pursuit of rowing took him all the way to the Paralympics in London, where he earned a bronze medal in rowing for the United States.

"It was really gratifying to represent the United States again," Rob says.

While rowing focused on the physical work of rehabilitation, comedy gave Rob an outlet to regain his confidence. The documentary started with an email from WWP requesting audition tapes from warriors interested in comedy mentoring. Rob sent in a tape and was excited to get a call back inviting him to Los Angeles. He still had his old material and it was still fresh and funny. But the biggest part of stand-up, he learned, "was doing it in front of people and figuring out how you wanted to word it. You have to practice 10,000 times with every joke, then start working on sets, and putting jokes in order."

The nerves were high as he took the stage for that first performance, but the laughter quickly set him at ease.

"Once I knew I was doing well, everything else got easier," he says.

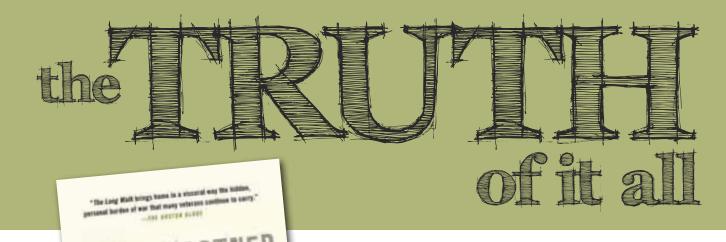
Got a funny story to share? Email an anecdote of fewer than 300 words to editor@woundedwarriorproject.org.

The best submissions will be published in the Spring issue of AAR.



Never underestimate the healing power of laughter. We're looking for your best stories from recovery, whether it be a funny instance during your learning curve or an embarrassing moment that years later is humorous. Email an anecdote of fewer than 300 words to editor@woundedwarriorproject.org. The best submissions will be published in the Spring issue of AAR.

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Retired Air Force officer Brian Castner served on an explosive ordnance team from 1999 to 2007 and commanded bomb disposal units in Balad and Kirkuk in 2005 and 2006. His first book. The Long Walk, details his experiences in Iraq and the resulting combat stress he lived with upon coming home.



One of the most remarkable things about this book, in my opinion, is the complete candor. These are the types of stories and graphic images (e.g., the foot in the box) that have accompanied war for centuries, but most veterans keep to themselves because most civilians just wouldn't understand. Did you start the book with the intention of revealing everything or was it a decision made during the writing process?

It was never a conscious decision, whether to graphically describe every detail or hold something back. That part of the book was biological, something inside of me that needed to come out, and I just tried to tell the story the best way I knew how. For me, Iraq was in vivid Technicolor every day, but once I had written a war story down I finally gave myself permission to forget, to relegate it to the back of my brain instead of the front. The sections about home were a little different. I didn't want to intrude upon the privacy of my marriage and family more than I already was, and even though I revealed a lot, there are some things you just don't put in a book.

As you read the book, there is little to no transition between vour memories of Iraq and coming back home. How did vou decide to employ that style?

I was just trying to get the feeling right, and to me it made no sense to write a chronological book where everything is in order: first I went to college and then I deployed and then I came home and then I went crazy. That's not how it felt. It felt like everything was happening at once, like some part of me was still in Iraq, but when I was there I was just counting the missions to get home. I wouldn't call them flashbacks. I never thought I was actually back in Iraq, and I never confused reality, but I also couldn't go to the grocery store or travel through an airport or drive my kids to school without relating every action to the war.

The stories from explosive ordnance disposal training illustrate how demanding the school is, but it also gives some insight into the volume of training that goes into preparing for war. Is it accurate to say that all that training kept you alive in Iraq, but also contributed to your anxiety when you couldn't turn it off at home?

I think that's accurate, and I am far from alone in that. I think the military does a very good job of turning you "on," and you need to be on to survive combat, but we're only learning now how to turn everybody off. The point isn't to change the initial training, but to do what we can to lessen the mental shock once soldiers return home.

It's important to remember, though, what an unforgiving teacher war is itself. Grueling training or not, the misery of combat itself contributes plenty to the crazy feeling. War teaches you things about yourself and the world that are hard to learn other places, and it's a decidedly mixed bag of camaraderie and suffering.

One of the most haunting scenes from this book for me comes toward the end when you dress your son for hockey. As I read it I couldn't understand why this was so upsetting until it ended with: "I just put my seven-year-old son in a bomb suit and sent him on the Long Walk." In many respects, this book can serve as a window into the war for families struggling to understand what's "wrong" with their loved ones after war. How has this book benefited your family and what's been the response from other veteran families?

When I was writing it, I had no idea this book would help the families of veterans. It's a little overwhelming; I was just trying to explain the war to myself and my wife and eventually my children, when they get old enough to read it. But my wife said the book helped her understand me in a way that nothing else did, and I've had a lot of readers tell me that it provided some insight into the inner workings of their own son or daughter, or father, or spouse. Every veteran fought their own war, every veteran did or saw something different, but if some part of my book helps start a conversation in another family, helps bridge some gap, then I'm humbled that I was able to be of service.

It's hard for many veterans to put their emotions and PTSD into words, but often a big step in their recovery is finding their own personal analogy for what they're going through. You vividly describe a spider crawling out of your head, your chest bursting, the last week of school before vacation. Has putting a name or a face to your feelings, thoughts, and memories been cathartic or therapeutic for you?

Human beings tell stories to make sense of the world. So sure, the writing is cathartic, but no one needs to publish a book to get the same benefit. I think there is great value in anyone getting their story out of their gut and onto paper, freeing it so it doesn't have any more hold on you. I called it the Crazy feeling, with a capital C, because I couldn't find another word that accurately described everything that was happening to me, the physical and mental symptoms both. But anyone can write their tale that makes sense to them, and there are a lot of great veteran writing programs around the country that help facilitate this.

The book ends on a semi-positive note, though, like many veterans your feelings will endure for a lifetime. What does the future hold for you?

There's no cure for all the things you learn in wartime, and so the feeling is never fully gone. I still run plenty, do yoga, but I have put the feeling in its place, and when it comes back, I know it will eventually leave again. I have some small measure of control over it now. My shrink calls it my shadow. Your shadow is there all the time, but you don't have to look at it. That's what I was doing, staring at the Crazy feeling all day and waiting for it to go away, and of course it never would. So it still follows me, and when another close friend dies in Afghanistan it comes back, but not permanently, and not with the power it had before.

Want to share your story? Visit wwp10.org to find out how.

Excerpts from The Long Walk

The naïve excitement of combat lasted little longer than a month. ... The exhaustion set in, and I walked through the war in a haze. ... The lunches melded into dinners that all tasted the same. The days turned into weeks, and weeks into months. They became a blur of cigarettes and explosions, situationreport deadlines and bloody pieces of children, bone-weary exhaustion and black, black coffee.

A STORY OF WAR AND THE LIFE THAT FOLLOWS

I'm on the road again, conducting training in another faceless city, sitting in a blank hotel room. My wife pleads with me on the phone.

"Please," my wife begs, sobbing between words. "Please just cheat on me while you're gone. Please, just go do it. Let me leave you with a clear conscience. Free me and the children. I can't follow you into this dark place."

I put the phone down without answering. I'm too scared to cheat and leave, so we endure.

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RESOURCE CENTER



The WWP Resource Center provides a broad array of assistance, both within the Wounded Warrior Project organization and by identifying community resources.

Here are some common ways the Resource Center helps:

- Registering as an Alumni or family member so you can participate in WWP programs.
- Answering questions about WWP programs and services.
- Connecting warriors with WWP benefits liaisons.
- Finding resources to assist in accessibility modifications.

The call today was taken care of in the most beautiful way. I can't even explain in detail, but the Resource Center did a fine job in getting my questions answered and providing information on the programs available to me and my wife. It's a wonderful opportunity for warriors like myself to be a part of the Wounded Warrior Project.

- Alumnus Caller

- Alumnus Caller

The Resource Center was there for me, helped me out, and pulled me through. They really went above and beyond to help me find resources in my family's time of need. They made me feel comfortable and as less stressful as possible. I greatly appreciate what WWP does for wounded veterans. Thank you very much!

RESOURCE CENTER FAQ

I'm in need of temporary financial assistance. Can WWP help?

Wounded Warrior Project (WWP) has partnered with Operation Homefront to extend emergency financial assistance to military service members, veterans, and their families who incurred a physical or mental injury coincident to their military service on or after September 11, 2001. Emergency assistance is in the form of cash grants paid to service providers to cover the most basic of needs such as food, rent, and utilities. Warriors must prove a financial need exists.

In order to initiate the process and for additional resources, Alumni requesting assistance should contact the WWP Resource Center and file an application online at www.operationhomefront.net.

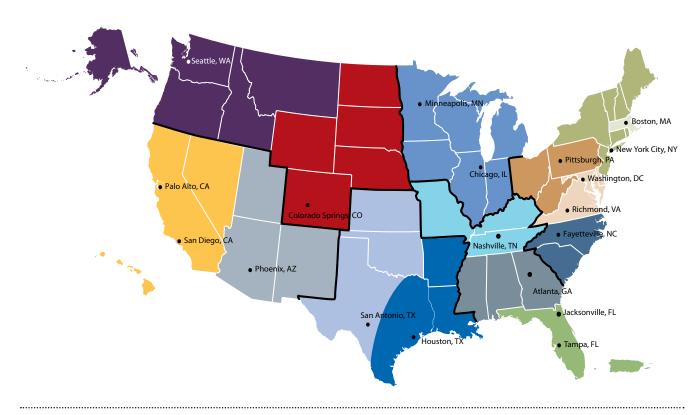
Can WWP assist me with filing a VA claim or an appeal?

Yes. The Resource Center can connect you with the WWP Benefits Service team. The Benefits Service team advises warriors on their benefits, along with information on how to access those services through the Department of Defense (DoD) and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). This includes filing a claim or an appeal with the VA. Our service personnel work closely with each agency so they can walk warriors through every step of the process. When a claim is filed, we make sure it is processed correctly the first time, and we guide injured service members through this crucial part of their transition.

I have PTSD and am struggling with transitioning after service. Is there someone I can talk to?

The Resource Center has specialists on staff who can speak with you and connect you with WWP programs that can help, including Restore Warriors®, WWP Talk, Warrior Assistance Program, and Combat Stress Recovery program.

The Resource Center is open Monday through Friday, 9 am until 8 pm EST. Contact them at 888.WWP.ALUM or by email at resourcecenter@woundedwarriorproject.org.



Looking for opportunities to engage with veterans in your area? Check your inbox for the weekly issue of "The Post," an interactive email from Wounded Warrior Project highlighting events specifically in your region. Not only does "The Post" keep you up to date on events, but it also lists job opportunities and direct contact information for the WWP teammates in your area.

If you're not registered as an Alumnus or receiving "The Post," contact the Resource Center at 888.WWP.ALUM or resourcecenter@woundedwarriorproject.org.

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IN THE NEXT ISSUE: Finding Purpose in Your New Normal