

Tom's Time: How 10 Years of Support Has Impacted So Many



Tom Cocchiarella has supported wounded veterans through Wounded Warrior Project for ten years.

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (May 3, 2019) – Countless crossroads clog New York City – it's latticework of lefts and rights. Little did Tom Cocchiarella know, a visit to Manhattan would serve as an intersection in his own life, both of challenges faced and those yet to come.

How do you condense 65 years into 14 minutes? Tom gave it a shot at last year's Wounded Warrior Project® (WWP) Courage Awards & Benefit Dinner® at Gotham Hall in Manhattan. His speech was full of stories, including one of a military spouse attending a WWP gala he hosted in Minnesota. She told him that she and her husband didn't have a lot of money and didn't get out much. But the night was special for them as it was their "prom." They got dressed up, took pictures, and [interacted with other wounded veterans](#).

Perhaps that's the perfect picture of Tom's selfless service. How many warriors and their families have been impacted by the nearly \$1 million his efforts have raised in Minnesota? The driving force behind it is a personal one. He served in the Air Force in the 1970s, and his son served in Afghanistan from 2010 to 2011.

"I was 18 when I volunteered for Vietnam; I never considered the impact on my family," Tom said recently. "Years later, I realized that when your son is in combat you can only pray, and I also knew that if he or his men were wounded, I wanted Wounded Warrior Project to have the funds to help them out."

Tom dedicated roughly 600 hours every year for the past 10 years for his gala and other WWP events. This

year's gala was his last.

"It's not hard to walk away from the gala," Tom said. "It has served its purpose, and my supporters have been amazing. But I need to find something new, draw in new supporters, try something fresh – I am not done yet."

That last part, about not being done? That carries added weight.

It was days before that Courage Awards speech that the symptoms began.

"We had been there a few hours and were walking around Times Square when I started to have severe back and stomach pains," Tom recalled.

Those pains subsided temporarily. But by the end of June, they had returned.

"That night the pain got so bad I went to the ER at the Minneapolis VA Hospital, and the nine-day process of pain management began as I underwent tests," Tom said.

What they found was a kidney stone and stage two cancer.

Intense chemotherapy treatments soon followed. He completed the last one the week before Christmas. The good news? They worked.

"The intense treatments shrunk the cancer mass by about 90%."

But he adds, "This stuff is never in complete remission or gone. We just have to manage it."

What Tom has managed to do, both with his cancer treatment and his career, is inspiring. He's served as vice president of a Fortune 500 company and was in charge of IT infrastructure for the largest private company in the world. Not too bad for a guy without a bachelor's degree.

"When I started my first job, my dad said, 'Go and work harder than everyone else, keep learning, keep looking for ways to do things better and faster, and become so valuable that your boss will always want to keep you, even during bad times,'" Tom said.

That dedication has carried over to his work with WWP.

"One thing I discovered when I do volunteer work is that you learn skills that you can't get in school. You have to learn how to leverage others' passion for a cause, you learn how to do more with a little, you learn a bunch of soft skills – all while helping others! It is a great formula for success that few understand."

The final story Tom told at that Courage Awards dinner was about a preacher addressing high school graduates. The minister told the students that when they were born, they were the only ones crying; everyone else was happy and laughing. He then asked them when they die, will they be the only ones happy and will everyone else be crying? Will they have made a difference in the life of others

Tom Cocchiarella has.

"I believe in testimonials, not credentials. Testimonials come from hard work, from making a difference in people's lives, from doing things that matter and doing things that are of value to others – and having a

genuine interest in others, not in oneself.”

He thought it was a mistake when he found out he was being presented the Service Award by WWP.

It was no mistake, Tom. Not by a long shot.

To learn more about supporting warriors, visit <https://www.woundedwarriorproject.org/donate>.

About Wounded Warrior Project

Since 2003, Wounded Warrior Project® (WWP) has been meeting the growing needs of warriors, their families, and caregivers – helping them achieve their highest ambition. Learn more: <https://www.woundedwarriorproject.org>

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