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Can Service Save Us?

By Joe Klein, June 20, 2013



It just might. By helping returning troops regain their sense of purpose, veterans' groups are proving that public service is therapeutic

There was absolutely no way Ian Smith was suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder. He was sure of it.

He was O.K. He was living with his girlfriend in a suburb of Nashville working three jobs — mowing lawns, delivering pizzas, cleaning a local church. He was carrying a 4.0 average at Volunteer State Community College. Yes, he'd seen some terrible stuff during two tours in Iraq. But others had been through much worse. He'd never been wounded. He was alive.

But it was a strange sort of alive. He lived on his couch, with his pistol. He didn't sleep much. The only way he could get to sleep was by getting drunk, so he got drunk every night and slept with his gun under the pillow. He had gained 60 lb. since leaving the Army in February 2009. He drank more and more. His girlfriend left him. He put the gun to his head several times. "He absolutely refused to believe he was suffering from PTSD," said his buddy Mike Pereira, a fellow Army intelligence analyst. "But I wasn't going to let him alone."

Pereira was working for a veterans' service organization called the Mission Continues, in St. Louis. He heard Ian's anguish over the phone and over the headset when they played Call of Duty together. Mike had lived through some tough times too after leaving the Army. He too had been living alone, on the couch. He too had put a gun to his head. But he was living with a purpose now. And he kept after Ian to come to St. Louis: Come for a weekend, come do a service project. Mike talked nonstop about the Mission Continues and its leader, Eric Greitens, about the peace he'd found. Ian was skeptical — it almost sounded like a cult — but he agreed to visit Mike and work on a service project, cleaning up the Edgewood Children's Center in St. Louis.

And there, almost without noticing it at first, Ian began to feel better. He was painting a room with a bunch of veterans, trading war stories. "All of them had this real tough, kind of like, exterior, but inside they were just like me, just confused and scared and really angry," Ian, now 30, recalled. "And I saw these guys doing these very simple

things. Nobody can argue with helping to paint a wall for a disabled or homeless kid. That's just good. There's no bad in that."

Ian went back to Mike's place and really slept that night, for the first time in months. "I was blown away by how much better I felt," Ian recalled. "And I thought, Man, if I could just capture a little bit of that and hold it close to my heart, I think I could do all right. Things could get better."

Things got better. Ian moved to St. Louis. He lost the 60 lb. He stopped drinking so much; he moved the gun from his bed to the night table. He applied for and received a six-month public-service fellowship from the Mission Continues, and then joined the staff as a service-project coordinator. He was so successful at this that he was eventually summoned to the White House, to serve as an intern with Joining Forces, Michelle Obama's effort to help Iraq- and Afghanistan-war veterans. He is now completing a degree in international studies at Washington University in St. Louis.

Saving Vets, Saving Ourselves

Ian Smith's story is unusual, but not unique. We mostly hear the sad stories, about the veterans who don't get it together. But by the end of 2013, more than 800 veterans, most of them wounded, some severely, will have passed through the Mission Continues fellowship program. An initial study of 52 TMC fellows, conducted by Dr. Monica Matthieu and three Washington University colleagues, showed dramatic improvement in well-being after a six-month fellowship: 86% of the fellows reported a positive life-changing experience, 71% went on to further their education, and 86% said the program helped them transfer their military skills to civilian employment. This is especially impressive, given that 52% of those studied had suffered traumatic brain injuries and 64% had been diagnosed with posttraumatic stress. "These are positive results," Dr. Matthieu says, "but we just don't have enough data yet to say with any certainty how often public service succeeds as a therapy for PTSD."

The Mission Continues, which is based in St. Louis but has fellows serving throughout the country, is at the heart of a growing community-service activism among this generation of combat veterans. Groups are sprouting spontaneously across the country, building houses, working in health care, teaching, counseling, farming and taking care of their more seriously wounded comrades. Team Rubicon, based in Los Angeles, has a roster of about 7,000 veterans ready to do disaster-relief missions around the world; it was co-founded by a Mission Continues fellow, Jake Wood. There are other groups that help veterans reintegrate through physical exercise like running or cycling. In some cases, these organizations have started to partner with one another — Team Rubicon has joined with Team Red, White & Blue, which organizes long-distance runs for veterans; Mission Continues fellows are serving with Team Rubicon for post-tornado disaster relief in Oklahoma.

This self-help ethos stands in stark contrast to that of the more traditional military-related charities. Eric Greitens, the founder and CEO of the Mission Continues, is notoriously tough on veterans who come to him with service-related excuses. "People understand the tremendous sacrifices that veterans have made — and they instinctively want to do something for them," he says. "And that sometimes leads people to give veterans an excuse: Oh, you didn't show up for work on time. It must be that you have posttraumatic stress disorder. Oh, you're disabled. Don't

even try. Or, you're being a bad partner to your husband or wife, or a bad father or mother. It must be that you lost a bunch of friends. We simply do not accept those excuses." Jake Wood has little tolerance for veterans who see themselves as victims. Posttraumatic stress is, he believes, a condition that can be battled and defeated. "If you're out doing disaster relief," Wood says, "you're less likely to be thinking about yourself and more likely to be thinking about the people you're helping. You're also presenting yourself, and other veterans, as a model, as a potential community leader."

Although the data about the beneficial effects of community service on recent veterans is skimpy, there is a wealth of more general evidence that shows the physical and psychological benefits of service, particularly for the elderly. Dr. Nancy Morrow-Howell of Washington University has conducted many of the relevant studies — for the White House Conference on Aging, for AARP — which show that community service provides clear health and psychological benefits, including greater longevity, reduced depression and a greater sense of purpose. "Actually, the elderly are a really good comparison group for wounded veterans," says Dr. Morrow-Howell, a co-author of the Mission Continues study. "They have to cope with a reduced ability to function physically. Many of them lose their sense of purpose and community after retirement. If they're widowed, they feel isolated. They need to rebuild their lives, rejoin the world."

In a remarkable study from Ohio State University, two groups of elderly patients in senior day care were asked to make gift baskets. One group made them for themselves; a second group was told they were making the baskets for homeless people in their community. The second group experienced a greater sense of satisfaction and psychological well-being than those who were simply making the baskets for themselves. "Service enables them to find their value outside their own suffering," says Barbara Van Dahlen, the founder of Give an Hour, a group of mental-health counselors who work with veterans, headquartered in Bethesda, Md., but serving across the country. "I don't think there's a mental-health professional on the planet who would disagree with the basic principle that serving others is therapeutic. This is not rocket science."

"We Still Need You"

"Lives have been saved. lives have been changed for the better," says Greitens, 39, a Rhodes Scholar and former Navy SEAL. In 2007, he was serving in Iraq as part of an al-Qaeda-targeting team when his barracks was blown up by a truck bomb. Greitens wasn't badly wounded, but several of his close friends were. A few months later, he visited Bethesda Naval Hospital to comfort the severely wounded veterans there — and he had an epiphany. As he moved from bed to bed, talking to young men who had lost limbs, lost vision and hearing, lost parts of their brains, he asked each, "What do you want to do now?" The answer was always the same: they wanted to return to their units. And if they couldn't do that? he asked. They wanted to go home and serve in some way — teach school, coach, work in the community. He found himself saying to the wounded veterans, "Great. We still need you."

Greitens came to Bethesda with unique insight into the power of service. As a college and postgraduate student, he had worked in refugee camps all around the world. He'd found that the people who kept themselves busy in the camps fared better than those who didn't. The worst off were the young men, whose lives had been violently

truncated — by ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, by genocide in Cambodia and Rwanda. They had lost their sense of purpose; unlike the older people in the camps, they had no children to care for. But if they were put to work, helping out with the soccer teams Greitens was organizing, or working in the kindergarten, they began to feel better about themselves.

So he developed the idea of offering six-month service fellowships to wounded veterans, if they provided him with a plausible mission plan and a host agency willing to sponsor them in their home community. He and some friends funded the first few fellowships with their combat and disability pay. They started slowly, built the program carefully. One of their first fellows worked with an equine-therapy program in Texas; another, a woman named Sonia Meneses, was sponsored by the Boys & Girls Club near Clarksville, Tenn. Sometimes it didn't work so well; sometimes the veterans who applied were just looking for a handout. To counter that, the very first Mission Continues fellow, a severely wounded former Blackhawk pilot named Chris Marvin — came up with a slogan, "It's not a charity, it's a challenge." In fact, Marvin took the fellowship but refused the stipend. "I had a 100% disability," he later told me. "The money could be better used by someone else."

A Can-Do Spirit

A Vietnam-era veteran named Jody Martinez, who joined Team Rubicon's disaster-relief effort after the Oklahoma City tornadoes, told me, "I wish we had something like this for my generation. I know so many Vietnam veterans who could have used it. There are so many lives that could have been saved."

Posttraumatic stress disorder has probably been with us since the first club hit the first skull. It used to be called shell shock, but it has become more prevalent — and identifiable — as medical sophistication has grown and as more severely wounded troops survive the horrors of battle. It may affect as many as 40% of the veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. It is amorphous and unpredictable, and sometimes maddeningly difficult to detect because there are no obvious physical manifestations; when it is paired with traumatic brain injury, it can be entirely debilitating. "It is also incredibly easy to fake, if you want to get a VA rating for disability payments," a veterans leader told me. But it is real enough for people like Ian Smith and Mike Pereira of the Mission Continues, and for Team Rubicon's Wood, who suffers from survivor's guilt. The difference is, they believe it can be treated.

Van Dahlen of Give an Hour is vehement about dropping the D from PTSD. "In most cases, especially those without a significant brain injury, they're going through a reasonable reaction to the terrifying experience of combat," she says. "If it's treated well, the effects should be transitory." Indeed, posttraumatic stress isn't just a reaction to the horrors of combat. When they leave the service, veterans are catapulted from an intense brother-and-sisterhood where the most serious issues imaginable are confronted every day, and plopped down into a society where they no longer have the comfort and purpose of being part of something larger than themselves. In a perverse way, their reaction to civilian life can be seen as a form of sanity: too many of the rest of us have slouched from active citizenship to passive couch-potato-hood. Many returning veterans find that passivity and isolation intolerable.

William McNulty, a co-founder of Team Rubicon, told me that the sense of military camaraderie regained on a disaster-relief project is so intense that it can lead to unintended consequences. After Hurricane Sandy, there were

several reports of Team Rubicon volunteers crashing into depression or worse when they got home. One Marine telephoned McNulty in the middle of the night with a gun to his head; McNulty spent most of the night talking to him, finally persuading the Marine to give the gun to his grandmother. As a result of such cases, Team Rubicon and Van Dahlen are planning a joint mental-health and service effort, which would embed counselors in Team Rubicon disaster-relief teams and offer follow-on counseling to those who want it.

Greitens has also changed the Mission Continues fellowship program to reflect the psychological realities of coming home. Fellows are now grouped into four classes a year and have a weekend orientation at which they get to meet one another and gain the sense that they are, once again, part of something larger than themselves. They do a service project together and take an oath of service before returning to their communities. In addition, Greitens and his team have developed a mandatory personal-development curriculum for the fellows — reading and writing assignments each month to help their transition to civilian life and, more, to become “citizen leaders” back home.

In a 2009 study, 92% of recent veterans expressed a desire to continue serving in some way. Greitens and other leaders of veterans’ self-help groups want to modify the GI Bill so that it will also pay for a year’s worth of public service. “Service can help focus veterans, help them to find a career path and use their educational benefits under the GI Bill wisely,” says Ken Harbaugh of Service Nation, who was present at the creation of the Mission Continues. “Imagine the impact that 100,000 veterans spending a year in public service back home would have.”

But why stop there? “We’ve created a human program that works for veterans,” Greitens says. “There is no reason it can’t work for civilians.” There seems to be a general hunger for service in the 30-and-under millennial generation; in 2011 there were 582,000 applications for 82,000 slots in AmeriCorps, the federal government’s volunteer service program. Programs like the Peace Corps and Teach for America are also bursting with applicants.

Imagine the impact a robust national-service program — like the service corps proposed by the Aspen Institute’s Franklin Project — would have on our nation of couch dwellers. If service is therapeutic, imagine the impact, especially on boys, who are having more trouble than girls graduating from high school and college these days. If service can reconnect individuals to their communities, imagine the impact on our waning sense of civic engagement, our weirdly hollow democracy in which active citizenship has been displaced by marketing and political sloganeering. Would it be so bad if the rest of us became more attuned to the values and can-do spirit our veterans have brought home from the military?

After the Tornado

Of course, it’s not enough to talk about the values of service. It’s best to experience them — and so, after the Oklahoma City tornadoes, I spent Memorial Day weekend working with the Team Rubicon members doing disaster relief.

We deployed in the postapocalyptic shadow of the local Imax. The landscape was the sort of thing you’d normally see inside the theater — total, sometimes incomprehensible post-tornado devastation. There were cars literally wrapped

around trees, 2-by-4s javelined into the sides of houses, a hospital crushed, strip-mall banality interrupted, obliterated by the storm, and then resumed a quarter-mile down the road.

But there was an occupying army of relief workers, led by local first responders, exhausted but still humping it a week after the storm, church groups from all over the country — funny how you don't see organized groups of secular humanists giving out hot meals — and there in the middle of it all, with a purposeful military swagger, were the volunteers from Team Rubicon. They looked tough, megatatted, in camouflage pants, gray T-shirts and white hard hats. They moved with purpose and spirit and were equipped by Home Depot — which has done brilliant work locating and funding the very best veterans service groups — with an impressive array of chain saws, power tools, wheelbarrows, tarps and wood.

The 60 Rubicon volunteers came from all over the country, but most, in this first phase of the deployment, were from the Midwest. They were aided by a handful of civilian volunteers, including a cadre of first responders from elsewhere in the country — cops from Ipswich, Mass., firefighters, who seem particularly attracted to the Rubicon style — a chaplain from Florida and me. My team leader, Chad, immediately gave me a nickname — Grampa (ouch) — and a wheelbarrow. We worked our way down Southwest 7th Street, clearing debris and piling it on the street front (hence my wheelbarrow), chainsawing trees, covering broken windows with boards, nailing tarps to shattered rooftops.

This was the first disaster-relief deployment for about 40% of the Team Rubicon volunteers, by my very unofficial count — and it was a matter of joy and relief for them. “I feel blessed to have a mission again,” Isaiah Johnson of Oklahoma City, an Army veteran, told me. “This feels like home. I'm out here with my people.” Isaiah and his “very extremely close” friend Megan McKee, a Navy Rescue Swimmer, were part of a work team headed by Marine Master Sergeant (ret.) Michael Washington, a 50-year-old Seattle firefighter — known as Top to his troops, of course — who lost his son in Iraq.

Top was one of those guys you just follow. He radiated a natural authority, taking the lead on the toughest jobs while puffing on a very complicated-looking pipe. At the end of our Saturday labor, Top called his crew together and told them, “This was a great team. We really learned how to do this work today. We may not work together tomorrow, but you are all leaders now. You can do this.” Those were magic words for his squad. Most of them hadn't heard that sort of praise, or encouragement, from anyone since they came home. As Top later told me, it was good for him too, almost like serving with his son's comrades. (Indeed, after Hurricane Sandy, he actually found himself working with kids who had served with his son in Iraq.) “I'm in this for good,” Top told me. “I'm anywhere they want me.”

On Sunday night, back in the Team Rubicon barracks — a not-so-nearby high school gymnasium — we gathered for an evening debrief. Some people talked about the day's work; others talked about how they'd been feeling alone, stressed, angry, passive back home ... and how being part of a unit once again really mattered. We sat in the dark bleachers of the high school's softball field. A warm, gentle breeze was blowing in from the Gulf. Toward the end of the meeting, an incredibly courageous Army staff sergeant named Chris Dominski remembered not just the men who had died under his command in Baghdad in 2004, but also the precise date and circumstances of their deaths,

the names of the wives and children they'd left behind. He spoke softly. The effect was mesmerizing. Chris said he'd had a hard time with survivor guilt after he came home. He said he'd tried to commit suicide twice. "I guess I wasn't too good at it, but what I wanted to say here is that you — Team Rubicon — you saved my life."

On Monday, there was a Memorial Day service at the Team Rubicon Forward Operation Base in the parking lot of the Home Depot on Southwest 19th Street. Top led the service. He read the Gettysburg Address in a taut, sharp military manner, in a way that brought power and emotional resonance to the words:

"That we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain — that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom — and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

After that, Top recited the names of dead comrades, ending with his son. The flag was raised, and taps was sung by a solitary anonymous voice. And then we all went back to work. The march down Southwest 7th Street continued — and, this time, the men and women of Team Rubicon were winning their battle, house to house.