

Hearts of Patriots – Home but Not Whole Supporting Those Who Stand by Our Heroes



By Denise Gula Weller



I've always believed the arts have the power to deliver a social message more effectively than words alone. Periodically, I've expressed that belief by creating theatrical works that bring attention to issues I care about while hoping it will also resonate with the audience. "Blood Stripe: A Spouse's Story" was such a work. The multi-media theatrical piece tells the story of the spouse of a Marine who served in Iraq. He survived the war, but now suffers from PTSD and TBI (Traumatic Brain Injury). You may not be aware that approximately 730,000 veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan suffer from PTSD, major depression, or other mental health conditions. Sadly, one in five, a staggering 146,000 of these veterans have been diagnosed with PTSD. Of those who are married, nearly 50 percent of their marriages end in divorce.



I intended for the stage production of "Blood Stripe" to communicate to audiences the challenges faced by spouses of our PTSD combat veterans. More importantly, I hoped to validate the spouse's experience of sacrifice. But I also wanted to acknowledge the extent their lives have forever changed, simply because they fell in love with a combat veteran. The performance did resonate with the audience. To my surprise, it also gave the audience context for the struggles faced by many veteran families and ultimately it had an unintended consequence on me.

Following the performance, I received emails from strangers. They wrote that they finally understood the behavior of their veteran father, or brother, son, or daughter, and it allowed them to put away their anger and resentment.

One email spoke of a resentment that had lasted a lifetime. The email was from the son of a WWII veteran who finally understood his father's behavior. He thanked me for the performance and wished his mother were still alive to have seen the production. He believed if she had, she would have known that it was never her fault.

I soon realized I needed a more practical way to deliver the message than an expensive stage production and decided a film documentary would be more useful. While the film could help bring attention to the challenges faced by combat veteran spouses, it would do nothing to help veteran spouses except validate their experience. There it



was: the unintended consequence! Hearts of Patriots launched in March 2017 as an all-volunteer non-profit organization. Our mission is to provide education, resources, and support to spouses of combat veterans with PTSD and, in some cases, TBI. Since its launch, the organization has served close to 500 caregivers through our various programs.

Hearts of Patriots understands a fundamental concept. If the spouse, partner, or family member closest to the veteran with PTSD or TBI is not supported, the patriot is not supported. The sacrifices our veterans have made to our country are immeasurable. Too often, the efforts of their spouse or partner, those who work to keep their patriot grounded and healthy, go underappreciated and unnoticed. These are our priorities:

Recognize and validate the daily personal struggles of our caregivers through **education** of those in need and the general public.

Provide **resources** for spouses to better understand what is happening to their family.

Connect them with **support** in the post-transition period after a veteran returns home, and in the days, months, and years that follow.

To learn more about Hearts of Patriots, go to www.vetspouse.org where you can also support our programs that support our veteran caregivers.



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