

BLUE ZONES

“I believe that stress is a factor in any bad health.” ~ Christopher Shays



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Finding the way home: How our veterans build resiliency through gratitude and purpose

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A soldier does not become a veteran until he or she is allowed to come “home.” How does one determine what it means to be home? Is it a place? A concept? A feeling? A right?

Home on some level is an ideal, but it is also found internally. It’s the place where we find our center, our true north, where we are allowed to sit in our authenticity, feel secure and know we belong.

The words, “I’m coming home,” pass civilians’ lips every day with little relevance. “I’m coming home for dinner” or, “The kids are coming home for Christmas.” “I forgot my mask. I’m coming home to get it.” For our veterans, such a declaration at one point, held a much greater significance.

Some veterans came home celebrated as war heroes of what Tom Brokaw lauded as The Greatest Generation. Others came home only to be spit on and ostracized by anti-war protests and conscientious objectors. Today’s veterans describe their return home as somewhat inconsequential to the American public.

Upon reporting to basic training in 1965, David Taverna who is a local Vietnam veteran was told blunt as the butt of his new rifle, that he was never coming home. “Three times a day for sixteen weeks, they drilled it into us,” he says. He was told to tell his parents the type of goodbye that would not await the next hello.

Ben Walker, who served two tours in Afghanistan, came home to a motorcade parade that, even to this day, brings tears to his eyes.

The first time Brandon Hance came home, the home that he once knew had changed so much that he didn’t recognize it. It would be a total of six years and deployments in Afghanistan, Kuwait, and Jordan before he returned for good.

For Jerry Sweney, finding home took nearly 30 years after his service was completed.

As varied as their experiences are, coming home is consistently described by these local veterans as a process. For each of them “home”, became not a place, but a deep belonging, a distinct purpose, and a trusting bond with their comrades so visceral that they laid their life on it.

Once discharged, that sense of home slowly disappears. The family they built is disassembled and some members cannot take the pain alone. Within three months of returning home, Brandon lost eight of his military brothers to suicide. Walker lost 13.

“The last thing that ever worked for me was the military,” says Sweney. “I was so lost.”

Walker agrees. The two are sitting on the couch at the Alpha House, the first transitional recovery home for veterans in Collier County established at the beginning of this year by Dale Mullin and the board of Wounded Warriors of Collier County.

Both experienced homelessness, hunger, and a dependence on alcohol to help quiet the pain from their PTSD. As much as they would like to let it go, they hang on to a constant heightened awareness because their loyalty to that awareness is what kept them alive.

With a knock on the door comes a donation of food



Ben Walker and Jerry Sweney SUBMITTED

from a case manager at the David Lawrence Center, an integral Wounded Warriors partner that now provides the mental health and addiction recovery services to veterans that was previously lacking in Collier County.

Walker will likely make dinner with it tonight. He and his housemates have built their own family inside the walls of the Alpha House. The belonging, trust, and camaraderie they were seeking has returned to them, and they are supporting each other to quickly establish self-sustainability. Astonishingly quick, in fact.

In just six months, Sweney has gotten sober, found a job, and is preparing to create his own home with his new bride. Eleven months in, Walker has earned the role of house manager and has gone back to school to become a psychologist so he can help other veterans recover from the struggles he knows so well.

What is apparent in both of them is that with a little help, and a place to call home, they found a resiliency that was already inside them. They just needed to be reminded that it was there and that somebody cared. Though they are not far from hunger themselves, they will spend every Thursday during the month of November hosting a food drive for the hungry in our community.

Hance and Taverna attribute their resiliency both in and out of the service to their physical training and have found purpose and careers in teaching others to foster the same. Taverna literally built a gym in the middle of the Vietnam jungle and conducted workouts so he and his platoon had an outlet to destress, build strength, bond, and stay physically fit. “We had to,” he exclaims. “Otherwise, you’d go crazy.”

Though he was told he never would, he came home and used the skills he gained as a military engineer to land a good job, raise a family, and still trains clients at his neighborhood gym. When asked what it meant for him to be able to come home, he says, “Home?” “I never thought about that.” He takes his time and then adds, “Well if you’re home, that’s freedom. That’s all!”

For Hance, a piece of home was left in the Middle East, which is why he admits he kept going back.

“I loved it over there,” he explains. “I miss it like crazy. You have friends, you know your purpose. I knew what I was supposed to do every day.”

Although he was repeatedly rejected from every

branch of the military from age 17-24 due to asthma and allergies, his skills as a Mixed Martial Arts fighter finally won him a break and was allowed to join. Obviously tenacious, he says fighting conditioned him to never give up. “You have to keep going until the bell rings. There is no option to quit.”

Now working as a contractor, Hance uses his MMA training to teach first responders how to deescalate potentially violent situations without the use of weapons or causing physical harm. In a few months, he is scheduled to return “home” as he goes back overseas to, once again serve his country.

Not only have our veterans given up a chapter of their lives to protect our home and our freedom, they also have so much to teach us about building resiliency. They have transferred their skills to find ways to give back and find their purpose. They openly discuss the importance of building a support network and taking care of their mental and emotional health. They practice a level of vulnerability and gratitude that allows them to ask for help and appreciate the elements in our lives that truly matter. Perhaps most important of all is their perspective when times get hard.

“How I got through each mission was the sunrises,” Walker reminisces. “They were dear to me. They told me I made it through another day.”

Even now, he allows each sunrise to take him back to the beautiful mornings in Afghanistan where he would sit and watch the sun hit the mountain tops and give thanks he was still alive. There, in the sunlight, he is at peace and he is home.

Brought to Southwest Florida by NCH Healthcare System, in collaboration with Sharecare, Inc. and Blue Zones, LLC, Blue Zones Project is a vital part of Southwest Florida’s well-being improvement initiative that encourages changes in the community that lead to healthier options. For more information about Blue Zones Project Southwest Florida, visit southwestflorida.bluezonesproject.com.

Online Power Nine activity of the week

When a veteran is recognized, they often hear the words “thank you for your service.” While simply saying thank you is important, there are also many other ways to acknowledge the sacrifice and selfless service that many veterans and service members have made.

These include:

- Volunteering at an event focused on helping Veterans
- If you know a veteran, write a simple postcard or e-card that recognizes them
- Making a donation to a nonprofit veterans organizations
- Visiting a veteran at your local hospital on a holiday or weekend

This week, we encourage you to find different ways to say thank you to our veterans.

Let us know by commenting or by tagging us on Facebook @Blue Zones Project—Southwest Florida, or you can email us at bluezonesprojectswfl@sharecare.com to be entered in our prize drawing for a gift card from one of our Blue Zones Project Approved Restaurants.