

JACKIE MCMICHAEL, WIFE OF MICHAEL MCMICHAEL

STATEMENT OF JACKIE MCMICHAEL  
WIFE OF MICHAEL MCMICHAEL  
FOR PRESENTATION BEFORE THE  
SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
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Mr. Chairman and members of the committee thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Jackie McMichael and I am the proud wife of Lt. Michael McMichael of the North Carolina National Guard. Before 6:45 pm on September 6, 2003 I had everything. An adorable 2 year old little boy, another little baby boy to be born any minute and a husband who was truly the best friend I have ever had. After the phone rang alerting my husband of his activation I knew my life would change but I had no idea how much. My husband came back from Iraq on January 7, 2005. He walked off the plane. He smiled. He was a little skinny, but otherwise healthy looking. He looked happy. After the euphoria of Mike being home began to wear off, the changes in him were noticeable and dramatic.

To say the last 3 years have been challenging is an extreme understatement. My story is one I never thought I would have, but I can't tell you my story without telling you Mike's.

While in Iraq my husband survived not only the constant stress of being on a hit list but survived several blasts that have left this once outgoing, vibrant, strong, consistent, dependable man with many physical and psychological challenges we will be coping with for the rest of our lives.

Physically Mike has been impacted in the following ways:

- Mike must walk with a cane now due to a crushed vertebrae sustained during an IED blast in November 2004. We have been working on getting physical therapy and just recently received word that he will begin in April.
  - He has frequent migraines that are debilitating and at times have lasted for days. In 2006 he was hospitalized for a week because they wanted to make sure he wasn't having a stroke.
  - Like many Vets he rarely sleeps through the night. When he does, he tosses and turns. He talks in his sleep and suffers from terrible nightmares.
  - Mike has had frequent hallucinations about people and characters being around him. He's had conversations and interactions with them.
  - His memory is so bad he can often not recall conversations, decisions, events, etc. He can not consistently remember directions to familiar locations such as his mother's house and therefore depends on a GPS that was given to him by a fellow Veteran.
- Even on a good day he has hand and body tremors.

Financially Mike has been impacted in the following ways:

- He no longer has the ability to comprehend how to manage money, an apparent symptom of his TBI. This inability combined with issues of depression then mania and sudden distrust of

authority figures lead Mike to leave his family claiming to want a divorce and attempt to go in to business on his own. In 4 months he ran up debt so substantial he is on the verge of bankruptcy.

Many people think many different things about his actions during this time. But they did not really know Mike before Iraq. He would have never put his family in financial jeopardy. When we first met he owned his own house, his own truck. He had a good paying job. Before Iraq he knew how to manage money, how to save, how to make sound decisions. Upon his return from Iraq all of that was gone, leaving me to wonder what had happened to him.

- Mike went from making slightly less than \$70k a year to losing 3 jobs because of difficulty transitioning back to civilian life and now makes \$10k a year in VA disability. He is unable to work because of his PTSD, TBI and various physical issues. We are still awaiting news on a requested increased award.

Emotionally Mike has been impacted in the following ways:

- Mike went from being the star employee to getting fired for no longer being able to cope with the job responsibilities. Responsibilities he excelled at before Iraq. He was faced with men and women everyday who remembered and expected the "Old Mike" He was told he should be "cured" of his PTSD after his second Short Term Disability ended and a few months later he was fired. Now, on top of all the emotional challenges, the financial challenges are added on and alone these can kill even the best marriage under normal circumstances.
- Overall, Mike has had numerous breakdowns resulting in 3 hospital stays for mental health reasons since June 2005. He has attended a 6 week in patient PTSD clinic in Salem, Virginia as well.
- Since returning from Iraq his anger has reached levels I have never seen before. After one incident we admitted Mike to a civilian mental health facility. He refused to go to the VA. Although there was never physical violence, I believe he came incredibly close that night.
- His emotional issues have lead to poor decisions including leaving his family last year. The pressure of dealing with the normalcy of family life and losing his job was overwhelming. He began isolating himself from everyone including his children and it was only getting worse. He stopped seeing his doctors and stopped attending counseling at the Raleigh Vet Center.
- My children have seen their Daddy in emotional moments they are too young to understand. All they know is their Daddy was a Soldier. He put bad guys in time out. The bad guys gave Daddy a head boo-boo and now sometimes he gets sad and mad.

None of these events happened to Mike alone. They happened to me, to my 6 year old son, my 4 year old son, Mike's mom and to my parents and my brothers. We were left to watch as Mike self destructed not knowing what to do to help him or ourselves. We had no clue what was wrong with him and he was, at times, completely uninterested in finding out himself. He said over and over again, "I know guys who lost limbs and they are OK."

I expected things to be difficult. I did not expect this struggle. I saw the man of my dreams, my heart, become so detached he no longer cared about anything, not his children not even living. I came in to this new reality more prepared than most (I thought). I have a Master's Degree in

Counseling. I practically grew up in the Durham VA Medical center as my mother worked there for 20 years. I am educated, resourceful and tenacious and I was completely lost.

I believe there are a lot of good initiatives out there but they are either hard to find or typically can only afford to focus on the Veteran. Because of confidentiality the family often feels excluded in the current traditional system. I equate our situation to treating someone with a drug addiction. The issues are not isolated to just the addict. The whole family must be educated to support the continued healing process.

Since Mike's return I have experienced severe depression and stress so great I had a grand mal seizure last June. I had not had a seizure of this magnitude in over 10 years. I was left experiencing generalized seizures and had to be out of work on short term disability for 6 weeks. With my history of epilepsy combined with all the recent events the doctors related this recurrence directly to stress and fatigue. I never would have thought at 34 years old, with a professional, well paying job, I would have to borrow money from my Dad to help pay the mortgage so we don't lose our home. My children are too young to understand all the specific events, but they are not too young to express anger and frustration to the point it affects their normally happy spirits. Mike's issues are not just his own. You can not take one player off a team, train and educate only him or her on the game, and expect to win a championship. You must train the whole team.

There is a great need for "Whole Family" Education and resources. Educating the Vets on the importance of a Collaborative Rehabilitation is critical. I believe many Vets see their transition as their issue alone. Mike was very resistant to me talking to his Doctors or telling me anything about what he was working on. This is understandable as I am very aware of HIPAA regulations and confidentiality. But I was losing my husband and I was seeing things I knew they could not have been aware of. I called his doctors and told them "You don't have to say anything about Mike, just listen to me. This is what I am seeing at home." All I wanted was to know what to look for, what to expect, what to do, how to help. It took us about a year and a half to get connected with them, but we are now blessed to have a collaboration of professionals from the Durham VA, the Raleigh Vet Center and the Wounded Warrior Project to help us. They have truly saved Mike's life and our family.

My Humble Opinion:

I would have benefitted from earlier awareness of resources for both active duty and citizen soldier families. (Being the wife of a National Guard officer, I was not immersed in the military culture and at times was, again, lost). The Raleigh Vet Center's "8 Habits of Highly Effective Marriages" and couples counseling resources are examples of invaluable offerings we have gladly taken advantage of, but I want more. Education on PTSD, TBI, legal issues, coping skills, transitioning the family back to a 2 or single parent household, setting boundaries, relationship counseling, personal counseling and navigating the benefits labyrinth (on top of all the emotional and psychological concerns we have to deal with, the financial impact is a crushing blow. I can not express this enough). These are just a few topics with sustainable benefits to the Vet and the family. I'd like to see this information advertised. It may already exist, but how do families find out about them? Often the Vet must initiate first contact.

I'd like to see doors open to families even though their Vet may not be ready to cope emotionally with their injuries yet. This may require a re-education of our medical community on how to do this effectively without jeopardizing the regulations they must follow while still meeting the needs of the Veteran. I'd like to see the VA leverage the relationship and love we have for our wounded warriors to help us all heal and teach us how to be a family again.

I greatly appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today and thank you for your time.