



## Testimony – Blayne Smith, Executive Director

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### **Understanding the challenge**

The physical wounds of war are quite real and require dedicated attention and care. However, the invisible wounds of war affect a significant percentage of our Veteran population and must be addressed. Conditions such as post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injury (TBI) have justifiably moved into the light are oft cited as the culprits for Veteran challenges. While these conditions are serious, we submit that there are additional, perhaps overlooked, causes for the difficulty in transitioning from military-member to civilian. For many Veterans, survivors' remorse and guilt can be debilitating. For others, the loss of purpose, identity, and camaraderie can be devastating and greatly inhibit a smooth reintegration process.

### **Understanding the people**

It is critically important to understand Veterans' needs and preferences when creating support programs, rather than simply giving them what we think they need. That is why Team RWB conducted a representative study of Veterans in July of 2012. The study was extremely informative and uncovered Veterans' true wants and needs: connection to community, physical activity, camaraderie, opportunities to serve, and meaningful relationships.

We also discovered that Veterans generally fall into one of three groups. We call them: *Connection-seekers*, *Family-focused*, and *Driven*. Interestingly, Connection-seekers and Driven have very complementary needs. While about 25% of Veterans are seeking connection, mentorship, and belonging (Connection-seekers); another 25% are actively looking for opportunities to lead, coach, mentor, and matter (Driven). The remaining 50% are generally getting along quite well and will join only if the experience adds value to their life (Family-focused). Armed with this knowledge and understanding, we went about creating a model that would actually give Veterans what they were asking for.

### **The solution requires empathy, not sympathy**

In order to provide Veterans with what they are seeking, we know that we need local, consistent, and inclusive programs that foster authentic interactions. We need to connect Veterans to other Veterans, and perhaps more importantly, non-Veterans within their communities. When people truly know each other, they build trust. Trust creates genuine, supportive relationships, and those relationships are the foundation upon which a healthy, happy, productive life can be built.

While post-traumatic stress, head injuries, depression, and anxiety can be challenges for Veterans, these are not "Veteran issues". These are human issues, experienced by many Americans. In most cases, Veterans and non-veterans have many more similarities than they do differences. This is easily discovered once we establish authentic relationships with one another. Our job at Team RWB is to create the conditions for these relationships.

### **Why physical activity works so well**



It is clear that exercise improves physical health. Service members learn the benefits of maintaining a rigorous fitness regimen from the time they conduct initial training. However, we now know that physical activity, even moderate exercise, can also significantly improve mood, reduce stress, and limit anxiety. Some studies (Otto/Smits) show exercise to be as effective as common anti-depressants and counseling at combatting depression.

In addition to improving health and mood, physical activity is an extremely efficient vehicle for building authentic relationships. Shared accomplishment, accountability, and even shared hardship are powerful drivers of connection and friendship. This team concept is very attractive to Veterans because (unlike therapy) on a team, everybody contributes and everybody benefits. Team RWB members will generally tell you that they are participating in order to support their fellow Veteran, and that is just fine. We do not require them to identify themselves as in-need or wounded or broken. At Team RWB, we don't rank-order suffering or injury. Put more positively, we don't rank-order "deserving". We simply provide Veterans an opportunity to be part of new team, to engage in positive activities, and to support their community.

### Remarkable results

Team RWB's model of delivering local, consistent, and inclusive opportunities for positive involvement is clearly resonating with Veterans and community members alike. Over the past two years, total membership has increased almost ten-fold (to over 55,000) and is continuing to grow at a rate of 700 signups per week. We have gone from 10 local chapters to nearly 120, hosting over 800 activities and facilitating more than 10,000 unique veteran interactions per month.

While these outputs tell part of the story, the outcomes are even more compelling. In a recent survey of 4,438 members, we learned that our programs are having a profound impact. A significant majority of members reported living richer lives since joining the organization. They indicated improved health (physical, mental, and emotional), more meaningful relationships, and a stronger sense of purpose and identity. Moreover, while outcomes were generally positive, those who are active in the organization consistently reported much higher levels of enrichment than those who identified themselves as less active.

For example, nearly half (45%) of "less active" TRWB Veterans felt part of something bigger than themselves, but the percentage jumped to 94% for those Team RWB Veterans who defined themselves as "active". Similarly, **61% of active Team RWB Veterans felt that they were "less down, depressed, or hopeless"**. While 57% of our "less active" members said they benefited from the opportunity to share their personal journeys, an astonishing 86% of "active" members found these experiences to be beneficial to them. Additionally, **Veterans have more people they can turn to for emotional support (57%)**, they are more involved in the local community (60%), they have more programs they can turn to for resources (64%), and they feel an increased sense of brotherhood/sisterhood in their lives (66%).



Lastly, Team RWB programs are effectively connecting Veterans to their civilian counterparts. A majority of Veterans (73% among active members) reported sharing the challenges they face as a veteran with civilians, and 87% demonstrated the strengths they have as a Veteran to civilians. Of equal importance, **75% of civilian members stated that they better understand both the challenges and strengths of Veterans in their communities.**

### **We can save lives**

Suicide is most often the result of deep despair, a total loss of hope. We can proactively address this challenge by ensuring that Veterans are connected to a supportive community with programs that provide a sense of purpose, identity, and camaraderie. Once we've handled engagement and connection, we can more efficiently deliver the potentially life-saving resources that some Veterans need. I would like to close my testimony with short quotes from two of our members.

*"I really believe that if Ian had been involved with this group that he would be alive today. Team Red, White, and Blue helped me make friends and feel connected when I moved to Virginia. It also allowed me to connect with the people I work so hard to save. This is suicide prevention and life enrichment in the most simple and clear manner." - Rebecca Morrison, who's late husband Ian tragically committed suicide in 2012*

*"PTSD and alcohol dependence were killing me physically, mentally, socially, and spiritually. My will to live was pretty much broken. Physically – I weighed over 230 pounds and could not run a mile without gasping for air. My blood pressure was through the roof, and my cholesterol was sky high. Mentally – I was all over the place. Severe depression and anxiety ruled my life.*

*Fast forward to April 2013 when I found Team RWB. This is the point that my life definitely changed. I found what I had been missing since I left the Army. Genuine people. The brotherhood. The camaraderie. People who understand me...Now I am down to about 170 pounds. I reap the physical and mental benefits of consistent and challenging exercise. I have taken my life back, and overcome the challenges associated with PTSD. My mental health has never been better. I have regained my self-esteem and self-confidence. I now have a wonderful group of friends and a very large extended family that genuinely cares about me (and I care about them as well)."*

*- Sean MacMillen, Army Veteran*

Team RWB is committed to enriching the lives of Veterans and their families. We are honored to be part of the discussion and welcome the opportunity to provide any additional insight or assistance on the very serious matter.