



Sergio Alfaro grew up in the impoverished neighborhood of East Los Angeles, CA, one of nine kids in a single-income family. Despite his difficult upbringing, he dreamed of becoming a doctor. When Sergio learned that the U.S. Army would pay for his college degree, enlisting became a no-brainer. Not only that, they'd give him a job that would prepare him for a career in medicine — combat medic.

He joined right out of high school, in the summer of 2000, and a few years later was assigned to a medical unit in Iraq. The fighting in his area of operation was heavy, and the frequent mortar, rocket, and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks left a lasting impact on Sergio. One day while he was on guard duty outside his base, Sergio's commander was killed in a mortar attack. Sergio was devastated — not only that someone he cared for was killed, but also that he was out on assignment and couldn't help provide aid. "I gained a lot of guilt and regret because I felt like I let Captain Tipton down," says Sergio.

When he returned home, Sergio continued to work toward a career in medicine, ultimately earning acceptance into Harvard Medical School. The pride he felt was overwhelming, but so was his survivor's guilt. "I thought I didn't deserve to be there and felt guilty for even being alive," says Sergio. When his post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) started to boil over, he had to leave school and give up on his dream of becoming a doctor.

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"That's the thing that hurt me the most," says Sergio. "I love medicine. I love the ability to be able to talk with patients and heal them. That was the way I was going to honor the sacrifices that a lot of my brothers made in war, like Captain Tipton. I wanted to make them proud."

Leaving medical school made Sergio feel like a failure and intensified his PTSD. He even plotted suicide. Thankfully, he began to get treatment and, in 2016, found Wounded Warrior Project® (WWP). For Sergio, the WWP Warrior Care Network® was the catalyst he needed to turn his life around.

"That was one of the first times where I was really vulnerable, especially with how I gave up on the dream of being a doctor," says Sergio. "I just opened up to everybody and found strength in being vulnerable and being able to accept your emotions for what they are."

Sergio also believes the structure of the Warrior Care Network program — incorporating family members and focusing on follow up care — was vital to his experience. "They recognize this doesn't just affect the veteran, it affects the family," says Sergio. "They brought in my wife, Christina, during the second week of the program and she learned so much about PTSD. Now, she's an expert. She even recognizes when I start cycling on negative thoughts, and she's able to help me anticipate more and help me through the panic attacks. She's become a part of my team."

With a renewed sense of worth and pride, Sergio has found a new purpose — helping other warriors by sharing his experience and leading them through their own struggles. "In medical school, they say you don't really learn something until you can teach it to others," says Sergio. "So helping my fellow warriors is really another step in treatment. By teaching others how Wounded Warrior Project has helped me learn to live with PTSD, I'm building upon my own recovery."



SAM HARGROVE



Sam Hargrove joined the U.S. Air Force in 1996 for the promise of a better life and a secure future. She never thought her job as an admin, working on computers, would put her in harm's way – but in Iraq, everything was in harm's way.

One morning in 2003, while calling home from a tent on her base in Tallil, a bomb exploded. The shock wave from the blast blew through the tent, knocking out the base's communication system and leaving Sam with a traumatic brain injury. Miraculously, she was able to walk away from the explosion – helping a junior Airman to safety along the way.

When she returned home, she couldn't escape the memory of the blast and the hypervigilance she'd become accustomed to while deployed to a warzone. In 2010, Sam finally realized she needed help. "My godson told me he was scared of me," says Sam. "I had a lot of anger issues."

Sam got some counseling, but regular therapy was only helping a little bit. One night, she got drunk and intended to turn off the road and crash her car into a tree to end her pain. Thankfully, she never took that turn. The next day, she told her social worker that if she didn't get help right away, she would try to kill herself again.

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He got her into a 90-day inpatient program, which helped while she was there – but she lapsed into negative patterns when she got back home. Then she learned about Wounded Warrior Project® (WWP).

She started attending a local WWP Peer Support group that allowed her to build relationships with other veterans in her community. She also participated in a Couples' Project Odyssey, which helped improve her relationship with her fiancée. But her biggest breakthrough came when she went through the Warrior Care Network® intensive outpatient program.

"I finally allowed myself to be open and tell it all and not just avoid what was going on," says Sam. "That's why I was able to deal with it – because I was able to just put it all out there."

The follow-up care from Warrior Care Network made the program much more impactful than her previous treatments and has helped her continue to make progress. She has since become involved in other WWP programs to augment her treatment, like WWP Talk, which has kept her moving forward. "To have a listening ear on the other line when you're going through things is very important," says Sam.

Now, Sam shares her experiences so other warriors will have hope. She wants them to realize they're not alone, and that many others have overcome similar problems.

"It's important for us to share our stories," says Sam. "It helps another warrior understand 'it's not just me,' or 'I'm not the only one.'"



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Chad Hiser was always familiar with the bible verse found in Jeremiah 29:11: “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” But until Chad found Wounded Warrior Project® (WWP), he never truly understood the meaning behind those words.

He'd joined the U.S. Marine Corps as a mortarman in 2000 and was a part of the initial invasion into Iraq three years later. The combat at that time was intense. On one day alone — March 23, 2003 — 18 of his fellow marines were killed in Nasiriyah.

After another deployment, this time to Afghanistan, Chad was honorably discharged from the military in 2004. But survivor's guilt weighed heavily on his heart. “Why was I spared?” says Chad. “I felt like I had more to do. Like I wasn't done.”

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In an attempt to make things better, he joined the Coast Guard — thinking the camaraderie and the service-focused mission would help him through his darkest times. He was wrong. In 2005, while at his Coast Guard station in Michigan, Chad attempted suicide.

Eventually, Chad's wife convinced him to open himself up to faith, and things slowly started to improve. “I told people I felt like I was in a boat, in the middle of the ocean, with God,” says Chad. “And he was just telling me, ‘don't worry about paddling. I'm going to take you where you need to go.’” His wife also convinced him to call Wounded Warrior Project.

In 2015, Chad attended his first Project Odyssey® event with WWP and had an epiphany. At the end of the multiple-day mental health workshop, the instructor presented Chad with a gift for being a positive influence on the group's healing. That gift was a paddle.

“I was totally blown away,” says Chad. “I always asked God to give me direction. I always said that I felt like I was in a boat without a paddle. And then, all of a sudden, I get this paddle. That was a sign that I'm supposed to dedicate myself to helping other veterans.”

Since he learned of his new purpose, Chad hasn't looked back. He's mentored veterans on other Project Odyssey events, encouraged warriors to get into fitness to improve their physical and mental well-beings, and shared his powerful story to help others realize there is still hope; they just have to find their new path.





When Jenna Malone’s husband, Isaac, came back from his second deployment in the Middle East, he was a very different man. A series of events during Isaac’s time in the Navy left him with painful and debilitating physical injuries, a traumatic brain injury, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The man who had always been supportive and active now relied on Jenna for nearly everything.

On top of caring for her husband full time, she was raising three young children and living in a new town where she knew almost no one. She had so many responsibilities that she didn’t have any time left for herself. As a result, she began to lose her identity.

“It was a huge adjustment for me because I was used to him being so independent and helping me with the kids and the house,” Jenna says. “Then having to go with him to doctors’ appointments, helping him get dressed and shower — I was just really overwhelmed.”

Jenna also began having secondary PTSD symptoms. “I was starting to experience the same symptoms he was because I was constantly on heightened alert to make sure nothing was going to trigger him,” Jenna says. “Then I started having panic attacks and my world felt like it was shrinking.”

That’s when she reached out to Wounded Warrior Project® for help. One of her first events was a caregiver retreat, where she got to meet spouses and caregivers of other warriors and learn about resources that could help her and her family. Then Jenna and Isaac found Warrior Care Network® (WCN).

“Isaac has really tried almost everything, and Warrior Care Network has been the program that’s helped the most,” Jenna says. “We worked through things like anger management and how to de-escalate a veteran when they’re triggered. We also met with one of the counselors to work on relationship building and communication tools for these changed roles that we have. It was an incredible program. I learned a lot.”

Jenna’s next mission is to take all she’s learned and pass it along to other caregivers who need support.

“I definitely feel like I’m in a much better place emotionally and as a person in finding my identity,” Jenna says. “Wounded Warrior Project has helped me find resources to help Isaac, and also to focus on myself and self-care, which has been something I’ve neglected in the past. Now, I want to give back and help other veteran families that are struggling and don’t know how to navigate their new normal.”

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ANTHONY VILLARREAL



One last patrol. That's all that was left for Anthony Villarreal. He was about to leave Afghanistan after his third Middle East deployment in four years of service in the U.S. Marine Corps. But on that final mission, a roadside bomb blew up the truck he was driving, leaving him with third-degree burns over 70 percent of his body, a broken back, and many other injuries. He was lucky to survive.

After three months in a coma, amputations of his right hand and left fingers, two grueling years in the hospital, and more than 70 painful surgeries, his greatest fear was not knowing what he would do next to support his family.

A backpack delivered to his hospital room was his first interaction with Wounded Warrior Project® (WWP), and the support he received from that point on helped him find his next mission.

"It was nice to know someone was thinking of us," said Anthony. "Not just me...they were asking my wife how she was. They really helped her...they told us about programs that could help with our transition."

When Anthony got back to his hometown of Lubbock, Texas, he started getting emails from WWP inviting him to participate in programs and go on trips. The relationships he formed with other warriors were invaluable to him.

"To me, they were not trips, they were meetings," says Anthony. "Meeting other wounded veterans and their spouses to get a better understanding of what my life could be if I just kept going, instead of staying at home."

Initially shy and withdrawn because of his looks, Anthony now actively shares his experience in the hope of helping other warriors. People often tell him that his story has enlightened their understanding of what military families go through.

"I think it's important for warriors to share their stories, so that everybody knows what we're going through as America's fighting force. We're all in this together."

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