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Posted on Sun, Dec. 5, 2010

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Back Channels: Giving vets a new purpose

By Kevin Ferris
Inquirer Columnist

Ian Smith had a plan.

After 8 1/2 years as an Army intelligence analyst, he was ready for a change. He had enlisted in 2000, not long after turning 18. After two deployments in Iraq, the young sergeant was ready to return to school and explore his options.

He'd done his time, served his country, and now it was time to focus on himself. As it turns out, serving others had more of a hold on him than he'd imagined.

After his discharge in February 2009, he leapt into his new life. He attended community college in Nashville full time and worked at a pizza shop part time. He had seven hobbies going at once, from beer brewing to watercoloring. He would spend eight hours reworking a single English paper.

He was driven, motivated, and for the most part on top of things. But Smith looks back now and describes his behavior as "superhyper" and "manic."

He couldn't sit still. Inactivity made him antsy, even angry. He slept little, drank too much. He was abrasive with others, yet always wondered what was wrong with them.

Smith had friends who said he was different, that he had changed. He didn't see it.

Then an old Army buddy visited, someone who knew Smith before either had deployed to a war zone.

"Within the first hour," Smith said, "he could tell that something was seriously wrong."

That friend had a plan once, too. Leave the Army, go to school, start a new life. But after a few roadblocks, he was frustrated, then depressed. Soon he was sitting alone in the dark at home playing video games. Another vet came to the rescue, telling the friend about post-traumatic stress disorder. He needed to get help. He did, and when he saw Smith, it didn't take long to notice similar problems. Smith remembers the friend saying, "People die from this."

Smith said he was skeptical at first. But at his friend's urging, he sought out professionals at Veterans Affairs.

What he learned is that PTSD isn't always as it's portrayed in movies, caused by one huge haunting event that triggers violent episodes. In fact, the trauma can be cumulative, and the person can react in a number of ways. Spend two deployments in Iraq being knocked around by IED blasts, watching friends die. It may not seem unusual. After all, everyone around you is having the same experiences. But going from that environment to civilian life can take some adjustment.

Smith's friend withdrew. Smith got hyper, just as he had on the battlefield.

"In Iraq, in stressful situations, you have to become hyperfocused, not hostile but very goal-oriented," Smith says. "In firefights, you tell people what to do right now or people will die."

Back home, feeling stressed, the hyperfocus would kick in.

"Coworkers say, 'Are you OK? You look crazy,' " Smith says. "You give off this superangry kind of presence. Complete strangers notice something wrong with you."

Worse, he says, "I didn't even notice I was acting a certain way."

He still acts "a certain way" at times. The difference now, thanks to ongoing help, is he recognizes the feelings and can try to relax, act normal, de-stress. It helps that he's sleeping more, drinking less, and exercising.

And he's again serving his country - and the troops.

Smith is now an outreach coordinator for The Mission Continues, a St. Louis-based nonprofit group that connects vets with chances to serve their communities. Fellowships like Smith's last 14 to 28 weeks and come with a stipend so there's no cost to the sponsoring organization. The hope - often realized - is that after the fellowship comes a full-time job offer.

The Mission's partner in supporting about 80 fellows so far is the Travis Manion Foundation, begun by the Manion family of Bucks County after Travis' death in Iraq in 2007. Each vet serves in honor of a soldier, Marine, sailor, or airman who has been killed in Iraq or Afghanistan. Families of the fallen are notified of the service being carried out in their loved one's name.

Smith's mission is twofold. He reaches out to vets just as his friend once reached out to him, directing them to any help they might need. And then he puts them to work. It can be one-day service projects, or their own fellowship with vets' groups, or Habitat for Humanity, or Big Brothers.

The point is to rekindle the sense of purpose and motivation through service that might have been lost in the shift to civilian life.

"This is not a charity; we don't give vets anything," Smith says. "We remind them that the country still needs them, that they can still do amazing things by being part of their community."

In short, he says, "we offer a challenge and they do great things."

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well done advice. never hesitate to seek help if you know something is wrong, or if friends and family suggest it. you are worth it.

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