

Starting a New Trend

Duane: The straw that broke the camel's back. I got into a motorcycle accident, crushed my foot, so now it's mostly prosthetic I woke up and went, "Wait a minute. I need to start to do something positive with myself."

My name is Duane, US Army, retired, from 2002 to 2012. My MOS was 13 Bravo, which is artillery, and then I reclassified to 19 Delta, which is cav scout.

What led me to join the army? For me, it was a paycheck. I needed a job. Right out of basic training, and I think I'd been out maybe two weeks, and they shipped us off. My tours were in and around Baghdad. I had to be at the edge of death. There's nothing that can prepare you for that. There were 15 of us from my basic training battery. When I retired, only three of us were left. Takes a toll on you, and then that darkness will consume you.

The transition to civilian life, you've become very self-conscious of it. It's really like being alone in a crowd. I was drinking myself to death. One of the defining moments is when my mother saw it for the first time. The look in her eyes when she would say, "Hey, this is what you were doing." Some of that, I don't even remember. It puts a strain on everything you do.

I was diagnosed with PTSD and I got into some VA counseling. Mental health treatment was almost like its own combat experience. It takes strength to know that you can't do it on your own. I remember telling my psychologist, I don't work well with others. By the end of the session, he was trying to talk me into a group session, going there to check it out. They were telling stories about places that I'd been at times that I'd been there. I've since learned that everybody has their demons. We're so focused on being individuals, we forget that we're better as a team. That's what mental health treatment is. It's about finding a team that works for you.

Now, I'm able to understand that trauma myself and how it affected me. Because of that understanding, I'm able to articulate to my family, my wife, my mother, and my children, "Hey, this is what I've experienced. I know I haven't talked about it before, but this is what happened to me."

I think that really opened my eyes to this notion that I didn't have to be what I thought I was. Now, I'm in a position where I went back to school and I ended up triple majoring, because that's my personality. I just jump right in, head first, and make it go.

During the course of that, I decided, you know what, I'm going to teach myself to sew. It was just sort of on a limb, and it blossomed from there. Putting together the fabric and then watching it come to life, really, I fell in love with it. By the end of 2018, I was doing New York Fashion Week. It was my secret superpower, because I can immediately change people's perspective.



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Now, I can look at myself and not feel like I have to run. The ability to change and the ability to get better is within each of us. The VA, for me, provided that framework. Fundamentally, it gave me a foundation to say, "Hey, you can go and find your peace. It's out there." Now, looking back, it definitely allowed me to not feel alone in that crowd.



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