

Snowmass Sun

Wednesday, May 26, 2010

SCENE: New wounded warrior nonprofit in Snowmass

Challenge America: 'When it happens, where do we go?'

By Steven Riley

Photos courtesy Challenge America



Veterans enjoy one fine day up at the Maroon Bells as part of a newly developed program that links vets and their families with communities across the country.



Vets and families share the horrors of war.



Shannon lost his left eye when he was shot in the head by a sniper in Iraq. Today, he and his wife, Torrey, work with veterans' organizations to help improve the lives of wounded warriors and their kin

In 2005, Challenge Aspen began to create specifically designed programs for the increasing numbers of service men and women who were injured in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom.

The programs have become nationally recognized and the increasing need for additional programs led the Snowmass-based nonprofit to create a new division called C.A.M.O. (Challenge Aspen Military Opportunities) in 2008.

"In developing C.A.M.O., we had a lot of contact with soldiers and their families and staff began to recognize that there were some gaps in the recovery process," said Houston Cowan, co-founder of Challenge Aspen, and founder of the new Snowmass-based nonprofit that extends online from coast-to-coast, Challenge America.

Geneva Templeton is the organization's director of operations: "There are a ton of resources for vets, but after they are released from the hospital, how do they develop a new life in light of their 'new normal'? What do they do to bond and recreate with their families? Where do they live? How do they get a job?"

Challenge America plans to answer these questions by assisting wounded veterans and their families by working with communities across the United States to link new and existing services and resources. The program also supports the development of recreational, occupational and housing programs to better serve those individuals in their home communities.

Said Houston Cowan: "The wounded vets are asking, 'Where do we go?' And the country is asking, 'What can we do?' Challenge America is an online resource that ties the two together so that vets can enter their zip code and find the information they need to get on with their lives."

According to retired United States Army Staff Sergeant Daniel Shannon, who spoke by phone along with his wife, Torrey: "Coming back from the war, I had forgotten how to laugh a fully deep belly laugh. I had forgotten what fun felt like. I just wanted to be left alone."

Dan Shannon was a 16-year Army Staff Sergeant when he was shot in the head by a sniper in Iraq in 2004. He lost his left eye, suffered traumatic brain injury, post traumatic stress disorder and an assortment of other battle wounds. His recovery experience and what he and his wife heard from other

wounded soldiers and their families led Dan to testify before Congress in 2007 on problems vets were having getting sufficient care from the Veterans Administration.

Today, Dan and Torrey continue to work with a number of national veterans organizations for the betterment of wounded warriors and their families.

"The recovery process is not one linear set of steps," said Torrey Shannon. "It is a package of needs that need to be addressed, almost simultaneously. And this is a package of needs, not wants. You need housing, you need some form of occupation (whether it is for a hobby or for income).

"You need to be able to address your children's needs because children go through their own recovery process in the face of a traumatic injury. Challenge America recognizes that there is not just one need that has to be addressed so they pulled together all of the resources any one person or family would need in the recovery, transition and reintegration process and actually put it in one place at your fingertips," he added.

Challenge America was officially launched in Washington, D. C. on June 8, 2009, by Amy Grant and Vince Gill at a concert to recognize and honor wounded veterans and their families. Challenge America was incorporated as its own 501 © (3) nonprofit in July, 2009. Its board is separate from Challenge Aspen.

A chance to live life

The conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have increased the numbers of soldiers returning with new disabilities. Challenge Aspen's C.A.M.O. program has become nationally recognized, and the growing number of wounded veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan has led to C.A.M.O. growing from two programs in 2005, one winter, one summer, to 22-23 programs in 2010.

Sarah William Volf is the director of C.A.M.O. and assists Geneva and Houston with Challenge America.

"Challenge America doesn't run programs like C.A.M.O.," said Volf. "Instead, they are trying to connect the dots, trying to help military families find information about programs that are either already in their city or ones that are the closest to their geographic location. Challenge America is a clearing house of information."

In the last nine months, Cowan, Templeton and their team have assembled an online resource for veterans that gives them the latest local information on medical, job and housing resources in 26 states. So far, they have assembled a Web site with more than 2,000 links. But Challenge America is about to expand through a new nationwide partnership with a much larger resource base for veterans.

WarriorGateway.org is national online resource directory for veterans of all conflicts, and it is one of the largest in the country, with over 18,000 links. Challenge America and WarriorGateway.org will announce their partnership in mid-June, detailing how they will work together to increase the opportunities for wounded veterans and their families nationally.

In addition to the online links, Challenge America is also working with lending institutions and corporations to find veterans jobs and housing. Challenge America has discussed with banks how foreclosure properties may be opportunities for wounded veterans and their families to find housing near the medical services they need for their recovery process. Corporations like Wal-Mart and McDonald's have pledged to use veterans in their training programs. Financial institutions are another industry that Challenge America has met with and received positive support for future work training programs.

As of April 2010, more than 37,000 service men and women have been wounded in action in Iraq and Afghanistan. According to military statistics, the number of all veterans being compensated for PTSD at the end of 2009 was 380,509 and the number of family members affected was over 1.5 million.

"Programs like these (Challenge Aspen, Challenge America) come up and veterans get an opportunity to speak to other veterans, have some adaptive sports, and it is a form of therapy for these men and women," noted Dan Shannon.

"Our decision to come to Colorado was not because we have family here, not because we have a community to embrace us because we were a prior resident, we came here because Challenge Aspen gave us the opportunity to living life and that's what we needed to do," said Torrey Shannon, during his closing remarks. The Shannons will next participate locally as mentors for a wounded soldier at a C.A.M.O. program in August.

To volunteer for Challenge America's new nonprofit or to volunteer for any of the organizations that the Web site links to, contact Challenge America at (970) 923-3004, www.challengeamerica.com.