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Summit for Soliders begins mission in Ohio



Written by Joshua Keeran

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BELLEFONTAINE - The highest point in the state of Ohio became a tool in the fight against Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in veterans during a special ceremony on Saturday at Campbell Hill located on the grounds of the Ohio Hi-Point Career Center.

C. Michael Fairman and Steve Redenbaugh, co-founders of Mountain Goats, Inc. (a non-profit organization created for the purpose of conducting outdoor adventure programs in association with humanitarian and/or journalistic endeavors), kicked off a project on Saturday that follows the mission of their organization.

"Summit for Soldiers is a public awareness campaign to bring attention to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder," Fairman said.

"Steve, myself and others involved (Douglas Thompson, Glenn Minney and Ron Pirucki) have been serving in the military in one capacity or another since the late eighties and this is an issue that has been close to us for some time."

To raise public awareness on PTSD, Summit for Soldiers is attempting to accomplish a rare feat - climb to the top of the highest elevation in each of the 50 states.

"This is something that is known as 'high-pointing' among the outdoor community," Fairman said.

"Most of the 'high points' are easy walks, hikes or drives, but a few are difficult climbs including a three-week Alaskan expedition to the highest mountain in North America, Mount McKinley (20,320-feet).

"Because of these more difficult climbs, fewer than 200 people have completed this achievement. More people have climbed Mount Everest than have done the 50 high points in America," he added.

At 2:31 p.m. on Saturday, Summit for Soldiers took the first step in reaching its goal as the group stood atop Campbell Hill, the highest point Ohio has to offer.

So why was the Buckeye State chosen as the first stop for the group?

"I live here in Ohio," Fairman said. "I was a Navy Corpsman formerly with a Marine Corps unit in Columbus along with some other key members of this project, so we felt this was the best place to launch this endeavor. Along with that we have many PTSD-related resources in Ohio that have been instrumental in helping us with this project."

As for the next high point to be conquered, that remains a mystery.

"We have a few places in mind most likely a surrounding state, but we don't want to release that just yet," Fairman said. "We are in no hurry to just bang out the high points since our first and foremost mission is to ensure that we are making progress towards the goals we have set, and we still have work to do in Ohio after the launch to makes certain that this happens."

Spreading the word

about PTSD

Before climbing to the top of Campbell Hill, members of Summit for Soldiers spoke to a crowd gathered in the seminar room at Ohio Hi-Point.

Redenbaugh stated the goals of the campaign are to raise awareness and education about PTSD, reduce the stigma and misconceptions associated with the disorder, work with family readiness groups to combat PTSD and focus on pre- and post-deployment training.

"A supportive community is a strong community capable of driving change," Fairman added. "This is a condition that doesn't just affect the soldiers, it affects their families, friends, places of employment and the community in general (civilian or military)."

During the event, the following statistics concerning PTSD were presented:

- One in five veterans report symptoms of PTSD.
- Suicides among veterans are double those of other Americans.
- Two-thirds of Americans are unaware of the seriousness of PTSD.

"Nobody who deploys to the battlefield walks away unaffected, but nobody wants to be that guy or gal, so typically people avoid getting help early on when it would be most effective," Fairman said. "This 'silent killer' doesn't just sneak up on us, we just have to know our enemy and respond appropriately.

"On the other side, people who might go get help avoid it because of other obstacles such as financial reasons or fear of jeopardizing their military position if diagnosed with mental health issues," he added.

Help is available

Minney, a member of Summit for Soldiers and a veteran who suffers from PTSD, spoke to the crowd about the disorder. "It's not just the veteran that suffers, it's the family that sees it as well," he said. "We (veterans with PTSD) are just as normal as everybody else, except we have a few trigger points out there that seem to bother us."

Minney, who also serves as an Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom coordinator, spoke on behalf of the Chillicothe Veteran Affairs Medical Center in hopes of getting help to those veterans in need. "We want to get Iraqi and Afghan vets into the VA system so we can get them on the road to recovery," he said. "We are here to listen."

Minney also noted that free help is available from the VA for up to five years after returning from service. For those veterans in Logan County in need of assistance when it comes to dealing with PTSD, help is available through the Lima Community Based Outpatient Clinic, which is located at 1303 Bellefontaine Ave. in Lima. "The more numbers we have, the more services that will be added," said Elizabeth Estrada, administrative manager for the clinic.

Estrada noted the clinic has been in Lima for the past four years and continues to grow. Veterans seeking assistance can register at the clinic, she added.

The Lima clinic can be reached by calling 419-222-5788.

For those veterans who have trouble getting out to the clinics, one place is bringing a mobile clinic to the veterans. Matt Francis, of the Columbus Chalmers P. Wylie Ambulatory Care Center in Columbus, spoke to the crowd about a community outreach vehicle the center has available.

Francis said the 39-foot long RV with a price tag of \$240,000 gives the center the ability to do exams on-site. "We are trying to reach out to veterans more who can't make it to the VA clinics," Francis said.

The Columbus-based care center can be reached by calling 614-257-5200.

Help is also available through the following services: VA Suicide Hotline, (800) 273-TALK; www.militaryonesource.com; Ohio Cares at ong.ohio.gov/ohiocares; www.SummitforSoldiers.org.