

‘Their Darkest Hours’: Families Share the Burden With PTSD-Diagnosed Veterans

Operation: Transition Outside The Wire says there is ‘no greater love than saving a vet from suicide’



Tom West, co-founder of Operation: Transition Outside The Wire, hugs Juanita Hendrix, wife of a U.S. Army veteran diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, as co-founder Shannon Francis looks on in Williams, Ariz., on Jan. 15, 2023. (Allan Stein/The Epoch Times)

By Allan Stein

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WILLIAMS, Arizona—U.S. Army veteran Rick Northrop and Juanita Hendrix had been dating for only a few weeks when they decided to go on a day trip together in northern Arizona.

Like all new couples, they were still getting to know each other. A leisurely drive among the ponderosa pine forests seemed perfect for doing just that.

Then, without warning, Northrop fell silent in the middle of a conversation, clutching the steering wheel.

Hendrix knew something was wrong.



Elaina Galvan (L) her husband, U.S. Army veteran Romel Armendariz, Tom West, co-founder of Operation: Transition Outside The Wire (C), Army veteran Rick Northrop, and girlfriend Juanita Hendrix (R) talk about the effects of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder on veterans and their families in Williams, Ariz., on Jan. 16, 2023. (Allan Stein/The Epoch Times)

And then, just like that, Northrop burst into tears—uncontrollable sobs that left his girlfriend speechless.

“I could tell he looked a little off. He just started crying,” Hendrix said. “I didn’t know what to do about it.”

Hendrix said it was her first encounter with diagnosed-veteran Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

She could only listen to Northrop’s weeping and hold him tight because “nothing I said made it better.”

Nearly five months later, Northrop and Hendrix are still together—and their relationship is stronger than ever.

However, the couple admits it hasn’t been all sunshine and rose petals.

There have been personal trials—individually and as a couple—and emotional pressures only a PTSD-diagnosed veteran and a significant other could endure together if they choose.



Tom West and wife Shannon Francis stand in the doorway at Operation: Transition Outside The Wire, a nonprofit they launched to help at-risk veterans, in Williams, Ariz., on Jan. 16, 2023. (Allan Stein/The Epoch Times)

Northrop, 35, an Iraq veteran, still suffers from PTSD working through his trauma with Operation: Transition Outside the Wire (OTOW) in Williams, Arizona. He has a good job running the kitchen at a bar in the town.

“The biggest thing I was diagnosed with was survivor’s guilt. That is why I have PTSD and many issues,” Northrop told The Epoch Times.

He knows the road to recovery is long and uncertain. But it’s one he’s willing to take with the help of an understanding partner.

For many veterans diagnosed with PTSD, the road is often lonely, barren, and fraught with addiction, homelessness, and suicide.

Seven out of 10 marriages end in divorce, according to a 2005 Pentagon study. Official estimates place the rate of suicide among veterans between 17 and 22 daily, while more than 33,000 were homeless in 2022.

According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), 11 to 20 percent of every 100 veterans who served in Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom have experienced PTSD in a given year.

The rate is about 12 percent for Gulf War veterans and 15 percent for Vietnam War veterans.

OTOW co-founder Tom West said a veteran struggling with PTSD can burden family members and caregivers tremendously.

Only the most resilient people are up to the task over the long haul.

West said he is amazed his wife, Shannon Francis, has stayed by his side with all the personal demons that haunt him from the military.

“My wife is still in my corner even on my worst days—and I’ve had some bad ones,” West said.

“How she’s still with me is a miracle sometimes. My violence in my past and how I would deal with things would be explosive. It’s the fact that I admitted to having severe issues. Then we’d talk about it.”

As a former U.S. Marine who fought in the Gulf War, West grew up in a patriotic midwestern blue-collar family.

He admits to carrying unspeakable childhood baggage going into the military and, even worse, trauma from his combat experience on the way out.

“Everything that happens in your childhood—myself as well—you rub some dirt on it, and you move on,” West said. “Then you go in the military, and when you come out, it all comes forward like a tidal wave.”

“I thought I was fine. I went into the military, rubbed some dirt on it, and thought I was cool. All the stuff came flying back at me.”



Rick Northrop of Williams, Ariz., discusses what it's like to experience Post Traumatic Stress Disorder with his girlfriend Juanita Hendrix in Williams on Jan. 16, 2023. (Allan Stein/The Epoch Times)

West tried to manage his pain as many former combat veterans do—he drank a lot. He got into fistfights. He lashed out unexpectedly at the people who mattered to him the most.

“My life is an open book now,” said West, who confessed that when he left the military, he did “a horrible thing.”

West hopped on a plane to Kansas City to live with a close friend. For two years, his parents had no idea of his whereabouts. He never told them, feeling he wasn’t “right” in his mind.

“You talk about a [horrible] thing to do,” West said.

At his lowest point, West was homeless for three months. He saw only one way out: draw his revolver, load a round, spin the cylinder, and put the gun to his head.

He recalled saying, “If I survive this, I will get off my lazy [expletive] and do something right.”

West pulled the trigger, but nothing happened.



Rick Northrop and Juanita Hendrix hold hands at Operation: Transition Outside The Wire in Williams, Ariz., on Jan. 16, 2023. (Allan Stein/The Epoch Times)

In 2018, West made good on his promise by opening a coffee shop for homeless veterans in Long Beach, California, with Francis.

The coffee shop became a safe space for veterans needing friendship and a hot cup of java—or a warm place to spend the night.

West and Francis had found their true calling. Unfortunately, the shop closed in 2020 due to the pandemic.

The couple left California and started a new life in Williams—and a new mission helping embattled veterans through Operation: Transition Outside the Wire.

Their nonprofit operates with 100 percent funding by selling coffee, roasted, bagged, and shipped by local veterans.

Each one-pound bag of coffee displays the replica of a dog tag of an actual veteran.

West said the nonprofit serves veterans diagnosed with PTSD and other social adjustment problems. The program includes a ministry, financial planning, mental health and family assistance, career counseling, and placement.

Plans are to build a ranch on 100 acres in Williams with 25 safari-style tents for at-risk veterans and a multi-services center.

The operation also envisions 25 acres of planted coffee and a roasting and distribution facility run by veterans.

“We take a different approach,” West told The Epoch Times. “A lot of it involves the ability to talk to veterans—that makes a huge difference. If we can get families—have them go through it with them—they also learn how to have those conversations.”

“We must recognize their service—mothers, fathers, grandparents, and spouses—they serve too.”

Once veterans leave military service, they often find themselves in an unstructured environment for the first time in years.

And if war is hell, readjusting to civilian life can feel like a bottomless pit for many veterans.



U.S. Army veteran Romel Armendariz of Williams, Ariz., talks about the effects of having Post Traumatic Stress Disorder with his wife, Elaina Galvan, at Operation: Transition Outside The Wire on Jan. 16, 2023. (Allan Stein/The Epoch Times)

“I’ll speak from my experience with Charlie,” West said.

Charlie was a nice guy—a down-and-out veteran West and Francis met in Long Beach one Thanksgiving.

When Charlie showed up at their coffee shop, he was hungry, and asking for a hot meal.

“That night, we had him sleep in our coffee shop,” West said. “After that, he disappeared for a while and reunited with [a woman] who became his wife.

“They were doing great with a house—new cars. They had a great thing going on.”

Around Christmas—an emotionally challenging time for many veterans—Charlie was in crisis and got himself checked into a local VA hospital.

West said the VA put him on medication where “you couldn’t recognize him in a conversation.”

Another time Charlie called five people on his cell phone to say he’d cut his wrist “straight up, from here to there,” West said, pointing to the same spot on his wrist.

Charlie attempted to cut his throat, but the knife was too dull.

That was Charlie’s first attempted suicide. West said the VA admitted Charlie for a second time and put him on lithium for depression.

“Fast forward, he’s on the I-10 freeway in Upland. He cuts his throat while driving. He calls his wife, an Army vet,” informing her that he’s suicidal.

West said the California Highway Patrol responded, and when they ordered Charlie out of the stopped vehicle, he refused to drop the knife. So “they shot him and killed him.”

West now prefers not to use the acronym PTSD. He feels the more accurate term is Post Traumatic Stress Injury (PTSI).

“When you combine a brain injury with trauma, you’re on a different level. You are forever changed,” West said.

As an emotionally wounded veteran, West has had plenty of personal experience working with veterans diagnosed with mental health issues such as PTSD.



Each bag of coffee ground, bagged, and sold at Operation: Transition Outside The Wire comes attached with a replica version of an actual veteran's dog tag. All profits from the sale of coffee go to help veterans struggling with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and other service-related problems. (Allan Stein/The Epoch Times)

Sean, another veteran, called West and Francis on the phone one day, feeling he was a danger to himself and others. The couple immediately went to Sean's location and drove him to the VA hospital, but the psychologist was on vacation.

Sean stayed at their house until the crisis was over. West put his arm around him and talked him down.

At least Sean was off the streets, West said.

U.S. Air Force veteran Brendan Bosley, who has service-related PTSD, can attest to the healing power of a willing shoulder as he receives help through OTOW.

Bosley, 30, joined the Air Force in January 2019 and was stationed in Alaska for his service.



Brendan Bosley, 30, formerly of Michigan, served in the Air Force until his honorable discharge in late August. He received critical support from Operation: Transition Outside the Wire in Williams, Arizona, on Oct. 20, 2021. (Allan Stein/Epoch Times)

After his discharge, Bosley, raising two young daughters from a previous marriage, went to live with his fiancée in Indiana with her two young boys.

But the stress associated with Bosley's PTSD proved too much for his fiancée, and she became physically abusive, Bosley said.

"She didn't know how to help. She didn't know what to do or how to reduce the stress of the situation. I think she just gave up. It was too much," he said.

The day finally arrived when she packed her things and vanished, leaving Bosley to care for her two sons without her. He now lives in a temporary shelter in Cottonwood, Arizona, surviving on 90 percent VA disability benefits while trying to be a single father to four children.

Thoughts of suicide plague him daily.

“The most recent thoughts replay over and over—just driving off the road. I’m always on the road, driving. That has been the big factor in how I would end it,” Bosley told The Epoch Times.



U.S. Army veteran Rick Northrop (L) and Tom West, co-founder of Operation: Transition Outside The Wire watch a video on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder on Jan. 16, 2023. (Allan Stein/The Epoch Times)

“The kids are my anchor. When I think of suicide, I focus on the kids. I do activities and play with them. I try to balance out what I need financially and where I need the help.”

When his suicidal thoughts become overwhelming, Bosley said he’ll call the VA hotline. Or he’ll count or spell long words backward—anything to take his mind off himself and suicide.

“It’s just hard. Once the thought is there, you can’t un-think it,” Bosley said.

But the worst part of having PTSD is suffering alone in silence.

“Even with my kids, sometimes, it’s just not enough.” The VA helps only so much, but “you don’t hear anything for a week or two.”

“Sometimes, you need help right now.”

Absent a supportive partner, Bosley fears being alone, with “the pressure on” him constantly.

“It gets to the point of where is the silver lining?” Bosley said. “I need someone who’s not willing to walk away.”

Brendan’s mom, Trina, said she does her best to look after Brendan in his darkest hours of need. However, it’s not easy being the mother of a veteran with PTSD.

Sometimes, she doesn’t recognize her son.

“When my son came out [of the military], he was a completely different person than going in,” Trina said.



U.S. Army veteran Romel Armendariz of Williams, Ariz., reacts when hearing about other veterans suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder on Jan. 16, 2023. (Allan Stein/The Epoch Times)

He keeps his feelings hidden—”but inside, he’s dying.”

“I don’t know what to do for him,” Trina said. “I don’t understand what he went through in the military because I never went through the military.”

She knows part of it is due to Brendan participating in a military Honor Guard in the Air Force, where “many funerals were suicides,” each affecting him deeply.

“Every time he turned around, there was a funeral, a suicide,” she said.

Brendan now has trouble sleeping.

“He has night sweats and is up all day long; he’s so wired. He’s constantly doing something, or else he goes bonkers,” Trina said.

In Brendan’s worst moments, she’ll call West on the phone, saying he’s “having a day. Or something is going on.”

“Tom is right here,” Trina told The Epoch Times. “He’ll talk with Brendan where I can’t.”

Romel Armendariz is another Army veteran living in Williams who’s been struggling with combat-related PTSD from his service in Iraq.

He carries the painful memories of battlefield carnage and plugging bullet wounds almost every moment he’s awake.

Armendariz, 24, was diagnosed with PTSD following his discharge from the military and was homeless for a short time. He credits his wife, Elaina Galvan, and their children with helping him continue despite the addiction’s pain.

Just talking about PTSD brings tears to his eyes.

Armendariz said that working with OTOW has helped him immensely, although he still has thoughts of suicide.

“It’s circumstantial,” he said.

“Sometimes, it happens at work. Sometimes, it’s when I’m listening to music or exercising. I talk to my wife about it a lot. I talk to Tom about it a lot.”

The last time he thought about suicide, it involved a .45 caliber pistol.



Several books on healing veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder are spread on the floor at Operation: Transition Outside The Wire in Williams, Ariz., on Jan. 16, 2023. (Allan Stein/The Epoch Times)

“I haven’t touched a gun in two years [but] it still cycles through my head every day,” Armendariz told The Epoch Times. “But then I realize what I have in life. It keeps me from acting on those thoughts.”

Sudden noises will often trigger a PTSD episode—like the sound of popping bubble wrap, just like gunshots, he said.

West said a combat veteran learns to be hyper-vigilant even with non-existent threats in civilian life.

“When you see a couple at a restaurant, watch them sit down. A veteran will always sit where he can see the front door.

“You’re always protective. You always want to see who’s coming through the front door, doing a situational assessment. Who’s dangerous,” West said.

Galvan said she became aware of Romel's PTSD when they met five years ago. She's stuck with him since he's been clean and sober for months.

"It was tough because it was like in cycles, you know? You do have to learn what to do and have an understanding. If you don't, it's chaos," Galvan told The Epoch Times.

"I can see how [PTSD] would put stress on anybody's marriage. With everything you must go through when you join the military, I don't think anybody comes out without some PTSD—mild or severe."

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) said the important thing for a veteran caregiver is to listen.

"War is a bad thing, and terrible things happen," according to the NASW website on PTSD. "Listen [when] he talks about the war. Don't judge, and don't try to stop or smooth over his emotions."



Shannon Francis and Tom West, co-founders of Operation: Transition Outside The Wire, stand in front of a wall filled with pictures of veterans they've known or helped in Williams, Ariz., on Jan. 16, 2023. (Allan Stein/The Epoch Times)

If a veteran cries, let him “with you or alone, and don’t try to interrupt or stop” him.

Better yet, never tell a veteran you understand what they experienced “because you don’t and can’t.”

West said OTOW helps veterans with trauma through satellite offices in Colorado Springs, Colorado, and Long Beach.

Husband and wife veterans’ advocates Brian and Rocio Alvarado are active with the Long Beach facility.

Together, they’ve spent the past two years helping homeless veterans with food, water bottles, and clothing donations at the West Los Angeles VA Medical Center in Brentwood.

The center’s 388-acre campus is home to 140 tiny homes, built in November 2022 in response to a burgeoning homeless tent community known as Veterans Row.

“You would see tents, and they had American flags,” Rocio Alvarado said. “We’d bring cases of food, water, clothing, the essentials. Many have special requests.”

“I feel we’re all just paycheck from living on the streets,” she said. “I feel like our veterans should not be dying on the streets. Nobody should.”



Brian and Rocio Alvarado, advocates for homeless veterans at the West Los Angeles VA Medical Center in Brentwood, Calif., on Jan. 16, 2023. (Allan Stein/The Epoch Times)

Brian Alvarado is a former U.S. Marine sergeant diagnosed with PTSD. He recently underwent cancer treatments following exposure to toxins during Operation Iraqi Freedom, and now requires a feeding tube and is largely unable to speak.

“If I weren’t around, he would have given up a long time ago,” Rocio Alvarado said. “Imagine our vets with nobody to advocate, fight, and speak up for them. They’d give up,” she said.

Their 15-year-old daughter still struggles to understand her father’s illness even after reading books about PTSD.

“She still takes it personally,” Rocio Alvarado said. “For her, it’s very traumatic.”

U.S. Army veteran Robert Reynolds remembers the long line of pitched tents along San Vicente Boulevard outside the West Los Angeles VA complex that comprised Veterans Row.

“Camping used to be right there,” he said, marking the location with his hand.



Former U.S. Marine Sgt. Brian Alvarado displays his military service card in Brentwood, Calif., on Jan. 16, 2023. (Allan Stein/The Epoch Times)

“It used to line the street about a quarter mile down, Reynolds said.

There were attempted suicides on Veterans Row, Reynolds said. He attributes them to veterans in a mental health crisis having limited or no access to care or shelter.

“They go down a dark road,” he said.

The homeless situation on Veterans Row lasted almost two years before the tents came down in November 2022, and the veterans began moving into the 8-by-8-foot tiny homes on the VA campus.

Now, Reynolds helps homeless veterans at the shelters as a member of American Veterans Post 2 in Los Angeles.

While the tiny homes are a step up from living on the street, Reynolds said more should be done to meet the long-term housing needs of veterans.



Robert Reynolds, a veterans advocate with American Veterans Post 2 in Los Angeles, helps distribute bicycles to homeless veterans in Brentwood, Calif., on Jan. 16, 2023. (Allan Stein/The Epoch Times)

“I’m happy there’s at least something where they can show up and have a place to stay,” he told The Epoch Times. “They should be in buildings.”

“I think it’s disgraceful you have all these empty buildings [on campus] and all these veterans in sheds with wheelchairs and walkers. It’s crazy.”

Northrop said the worst part of having PTSD is its inner nature, especially during a pandemic, and having to sit around nursing one’s thoughts.

Trina believes her son Brendan might not have survived if it hadn’t been for the emotional support from OTOW.

“I don’t think [veterans are] taught to come back into the civilian world,” she said. “You’re always in survival mode. But when you come back to the civilian world, if there’s nobody to help you or talk to you, your mind is constantly in that mode.”

“I believe in my heart Tom and Shannon saved Brandon. I think he would have committed suicide,” she said.

West said the most important thing missing in the lives of veterans is the close brotherhood they experienced in the military.



New “tiny homes” built for 140 homeless veterans sit on 388 acres at the West Los Angeles VA Medical Center in Brentwood, Calif., on Jan. 16, 2023. (Allan Stein/The Epoch Times)

That sense of purpose and belonging is the key to a lasting recovery from PTSD, he said.

“I don’t believe there’s a point of no return with any human being,” West said, though “nothing will match what you did in the service.”

West said when you put on the uniform, “when you’re with your brothers and sisters—I’ll tell you, there’s nothing greater in life than that experience. And then, when you come out, it all goes away.”