

INVISIBLE DISABILITIES ASSOCIATION
INVISIBLE INCOURAGE LIVE: VETERAN SERVING VETERANS
May 21, 2020

CAPTIONING PROVIDED BY:
VIRTUAL VRI
VIRTUALVRI@GMAIL.COM
WWW.VIRTUALVRI.COM

* * * * *

This is being provided in a rough-draft format. Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART) is provided in order to facilitate communication accessibility and may not be a totally verbatim record of the proceedings.

>> KELLIE POKRIFKA: Hello, everyone. Welcome back to Invisible Disabilities InVisible InCourage Live. Today we are having a special Memorial Day segment. I want to thank all of our veterans, especially those who have given the ultimate sacrifice. Today I am honored to be talking to veteran Colonel Mikel Burroughs.

>> COL. MIKEL BURROUGHS: Hello, how you doing? Glad to be here.

>> KELLIE POKRIFKA: I am so excited to have you talk about all the programs you have been doing for veterans. Talk a little bit about your story.

>> COL. MIKEL BURROUGHS: I am a 37 year veteran of the Army, started back before most people were born, 1975, and retired in 2012 as a full bird Colonel. Started out as a Private and crossed over to the dark side. Had fun serving my country. It was a blast. I loved every minute of it.

>> KELLIE POKRIFKA: Thank you for that. We do appreciate it. Tell us about how is the military tied to chronic pain? Are there a lot of veterans living with that this condition?

>> COL. MIKEL BURROUGHS: Absolutely. The number of veterans out there who not only have physical disabilities just because of the rigorous job we do in the military, they have those mental disabilities, those Invisible Disabilities, so to speak, that are really haunting a lot of our veterans. Anywhere from PTSD to traumatic brain injury. We have military sexual trauma that leads to PTSD. Anxiety, depression, there's a lot of veterans that have gone through a number of surgeries, okay, because of injuries or because of wounds, which cause PTSD. So there's a lot out there suffering. Just at those that I mentioned are the number one reasons for our 21 to 22 suicides per day that we're experiencing across our country. That if they're enrolled in the VA, that is if the VA is keeping track of them. We've got a ton of veterans out there who have served in previous wars, whether it's Korea, not so much anymore, but a lot of our Vietnam veterans that are homeless, they're not even signed up with the VA, so we really don't know truly what the number is.

>> KELLIE POKRIFKA: I hadn't even considered that with the number.

>> COL. MIKEL BURROUGHS: Right.

>> KELLIE POKRIFKA: Why is veteran suicide so important to you?

>> COL. MIKEL BURROUGHS: First of all, it affected me personally. After my deployment to Iraq in 2005, 2006, when I got back I lost two of my soldiers who died

from suicide and they left families. To this date, we don't know the reason why. A lot of times when that happens, when people die from suicide, really don't know unless they request a previous call for help. It's usually the silent ones that you never really figure it out.

Then, it's his home close to my family, my wife's father is a Vietnam veteran. He was a Marine. He was a Marine sniper and on eighth of December 2015, he died from suicide. He was taking a number of medications through the VA and he just give up. We really don't know why. Then of course, we found a letter that he had written in his personal belongings about six or seven months afterwards. That's what I made up my mind that before they fold my flag, I am going to do everything I can to save a veteran or save veterans, as many as I possibly can, it's that's why work with all the nonprofits that I do and I will continue working with those nonprofits until they fold my flag.

>> KELLIE POKRIFKA: Wow. Tell us about some of those nonprofits.

>> COL. MIKEL BURROUGHS: I'm the chairman of the board for Victory, Victory for Veterans Inc., VFV, it's a national nonprofit that is interested in using the number of suicides through education and through wellness centers. I've been with them now for three and half years as their Board Chairman. I sit on the Board of Directors for the National Betterments Transition Service a.k.a. REBOOT out of San Diego, and I have been on their Board of Directors for three and half, four years. And I work for a nonprofit, 501(c)(3) out of Newark New York City called RIP Medical Debt. Whenever one job there is to buy healthcare adept for veterans, first Responders and civilians across this nation and we abolish it. There's no 1099 requirement. We just buy their medical debt. These are people too and have times above or below the poverty level or 5% or more of their gross income is coming out for healthcare. Our healthcare is really out of whack. Our veterans should not have to pay for healthcare, and yet some of them have because they've waited so long to get into the VA and go through the rating process and the appeal process. I know veterans who have filed bankruptcy and lost their homes. The other thing that people don't realize that there is the veteran is covered

by the VA, but his family is not covered. So we have to take care of our veterans families, so we're abolishing that for our veterans and our veterans' family.

The last thing that I have created, I'm the founder of a program called Warrior's For Life and it is a virtual group support. Basically what we are doing here today. And we meet on Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday nights week. We have friends reach out to us from all over the country. I have one from Indonesia, one in the Philippines, one in Australia, one in the UK. These are veterans who are suffering from poster medic stress disorder. They're suffering from post-traumatic brain injuries, anxiety, depression, drug and alcohol abuse, you know, medico many other things. And, we just get together and we just provide to peer support every one of those nights out of the week. Every night. We feel if we do that, if we stay connected to those veterans and those first responders and we have caregivers who come in, as well, because they go through a lot taking care of those veterans, we can save lives. I truly believe we have over the last four years and we will continue that mission forever.

>> KELLIE POKRIFKA: I can't think of a better mission. That's incredible. What are some of the strategies you use for the peer to peer support?

>> COL. MIKEL BURROUGHS: I have learned a lot over the last years. I am sort of a subject matter expert. I'm not licensed in anything. It's just I have dealt with so many people who have PTSD and understand the symptoms, from lack of sleep to hypervigilance to anger to anxiety to depression. There's just a number of symptoms. But what we've found out over that four year period is they might have some similar symptoms, but TBI, traumatic brain injury, MST, PTSD, all those things treat individually differently. It's unique to the individual. We don't prescribe any medications. We don't, we want them to continue to see their primary providers. We want them to continue to see their psychologists. And their therapists. Just provide peer to peer support. We are just bringing other people on want to be able to tell other people what they have gone through their story and get that load off their shoulders. And just be able to tell your

story and not being judged, or not having a stigma hanging over your head, I feel, I can't prove it, there's been some studies out there, you can Google them, but I think that's just as healing. It provides just as much a link to be able to share your story, tell your story and share it with others. So we come up with different subjects that relate to those things. Then we let everybody talk. Is that working for you, note that doesn't work, but this is what I do. We bring on guest speakers that are experts or licensed therapist or doctors that talk about various subjects and various things that they could do from a holistic standpoint. But we really, really, really stay away from any type of medication. We're all about holistic methodology, whether it's reiki, whether it's meditation, whether it's sound therapy, whether it's electromagnetic therapy -- whatever it is, whatever we can bring to the table that's holistic, that's what we share. And that's what we talk about. And it's a lot of fun.

>> KELLIE POKRIFKA: That's very cool. I have done several of those for my own [indiscernible]. Can you tell us a little more about the stigma that makes it so difficult to get help, especially in military populations?

>> COL. MIKEL BURROUGHS: I can go back to my own deployment after we came back from Iraq after being there 12 months, everybody wants to get home. They don't want to think about what happened over the last 12 months. So they kind of push it to the back. But there are still some things out there that could have taken place. They are mulling around, and you get to the redeployment station and they take you through all these physical examinations and they take you through paperwork, at least they did back in 2005, 2006. And it's been refined, it's been enhanced, they do a better job. But you go through a piece of paper and answer a bunch of questions and if you say "yes" to any of them, you're not going home. You're staying right there. They are going to send you over to the psychologist and the therapist. Everybody else is going to go home and you're still on active duty. So what is everybody going to do? No. No. No. No. And they're out of there. That really hurt us. That type of stigma of I don't know what to lose my top-secret clearance. I don't want to lose my clearance. I want to be a deployable asset in the future. That's stigma hanging over their head, everybody saying no, no, no.

Right? Then they got home and the thing about PTSD or traumatic brain injury or MST, it doesn't have to rear its ugly head right away. It can pop up a year later. It can pop up two years later. There can be a trigger out there that causes these memories to invade, to invade you and really put you in a bad way. So that was probably the biggest stigma, losing or security clearance, being categorized. Man, hey, I'm cuckoo, where there is something mentally wrong with me.

Well I think we have put a lot of this away. I think society has put a lot of that way. I think we have put a lot of that away. I tell my veterans there is nothing wrong with having PTSD. You know what? You could have had PTSD before you went into the military. Could have been something that happened, family abuse, a bad accident, being around an alcoholic parent or any of that type of thing, seeing something really bad. Been part of a traumatic crime. Then you get into the military, boom, now you go off to war, you go into combat or you go into stressful training that's going to lead you to combat and those triggers pop back up and guess what? Those memories come flooding back in. And I think we've done a better job of letting our service members know and our veterans know and our first responders know that hey, there's nothing wrong with you, you have been hurt, you've been hurt from the inside out. We are going to help you and we're going to get you fixed.

>> KELLIE POKRIFKA: That's wonderful. I know when you're talking about the RIP Medical Debt, another one that you lead, I saw that on *Last Week Tonight* with John Oliver. That's incredible!

>> COL. MIKEL BURROUGHS: That is kind of how we got started, John Oliver went out and bought this debt I thought he knew he was doing and he didn't. His attorney said oh my god we couldn't abolish this debt. His attorney happens in our attorney in New York and we just got done writing a book so the people at HBO called down to Dallas and within 13 to 14 hours, they donated the debt to us because we are a 501(c)(3) and we were able to legally abolish. So they got the big red button out there that is how RIP got its start. To date, we have abolished a little over 80 million [sounds

like] for veterans and their families. Across the country we have abolished a total of about \$1.7 billion of healthcare debt for families and individuals. I'm getting ready to make another purchase here within the next three or four days for about another 300 million, and we just keep buying. What's really awesome about this is these are all private donations. All of this money that's coming in to abolish this debt for these families that dearly need it to be abolished, to get that out from under them, or on their shoulders, it's begin given by me and you, it's Americans across the country. It's phenomenal.

>> KELLIE POKRIFKA: That is incredible! I can't imagine. Over a billion!

>> COL. MIKEL BURROUGHS: 1.7 billion. By the end of this year, by the end of 2020, we will be where over \$2 billion in healthcare debt that we have abolished. And it's amazing out the number of churches that have been involved. We have NBC affiliates across the country, Dallas, LA, they have all put up \$12,500 [sounds like] and we have abolished 2 million. It is a one-to-one ratio. We are buying this healthcare debt, we are buying from healthcare debt buyers. We are now reaching out directly to hospitals across the country and we are buying this debt has no propensity to pay. They have no ability to pay. They got missed somehow in charity or situation changed over a two or three year period. We are buying it and we are abolishing it on a 1 to 100 ratio. It's amazing. It's amazing, the stories. We even have four research groups. We have for Berkeley, US Berkeley, we have University of California, University of Chicago and MIT. Those four universities have been studying what we have been doing for the last three years on abolishing older debt and abolishing fresh this debt, this year, they are going to come up with that research to tell the country and to tell our government and to tell everybody what affect abolishing healthcare debt has for society, economically, psychologically, what it's doing. And I'm telling you what, I feel that RIP Medical Debt is going to be the next United Way.

>> KELLIE POKRIFKA: That is incredible.

>> COL. MIKEL BURROUGHS: And to be able to do that for a veteran, to buy be able to wipe out \$100,000 worth of debt, completely wipe it out, take it off their credit file and there's no taxable occasions, I'm there all day! I'm going to do that as long as I can, too.

>> KELLIE POKRIFKA: That's incredible. Tell us, let's talk about Memorial Day, what does that mean to you?

>> COL. MIKEL BURROUGHS: Memorial Day is a very, very special day. That is where we go out and truly honor those veterans and those service members -- brothers, fathers, mothers, grandpas, nephews. You could probably come up with every relative. Cousin, second cousin. That's when we go out to the cemetery and as part of Victory for Veterans we are covering five right now of our national cemeteries, we are covering Fort Logan, Oregon Trail up in Wyoming, the Southern Nevada Veterans in [indiscernible] the Alabama National Cemetery and the Houston Nnational Cemetery. This year, we are going to add Baltimore. We are going out and we are placing a flower on every grave. So we raise money, a dollar a rose, and we put a rose at the foot of each grave and we either say a little prayer or we think that individual, by name, for their service. That's the true meaning of Memorial Day. It's not going out to a bunch of parties and going to this barbecue and that are BQ. I understand that a tradition, and we let everyone do that, but they don't get to do that until after 1 o'clock in the afternoon after we have laid all of our roses and paid respect to all of those people in wartime and peacetime have sacrificed for our country. And that is what Memorial Day is all about.

>> KELLIE POKRIFKA: That's incredible. You have any suggestions about families or individuals can help honor these individuals? Before I could have you go to our Victories for Veterans website and they could volunteer. Last year at Fort Logan, we've got a lot of roses that we have to raise money for because there's 125,000 graves there. Me and my wife started this four years ago. We laid 500 roses. Last year we had 200 volunteers, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, families, come out with their little kids. They love it. We had over 2000 volunteers. We laid over 12,507 roses. Already this year we have raised over \$8000. COVID-19 shut us down on the 25th, we can't do it on the 25th. All

the Memorial Day ceremonies have been canceled across the country by the National Cemetery Association the NCA. But we have rescheduled it for 15th August. I have told all of my volunteers and all of my donors we are going to continue to raise money, we are going to beat that 12,000, we are going to lay all of the sources on the 15th office and pay respect. We are going to do here in 2020, COVID or not.

>> KELLIE POKRIFKA: I love it, that would be wonderful. So anyone can sign up to do that? Before anyone can sign up to do it. All we ask is if they don't want to donate for the Rose -- which is only a buck a rose -- Bring a couple to you from Safeway or King super whoever sells roses, it's cheaper from us, but they also get to write it office through us because we are a 501(c)(3). It's a tax saving, a donation, we need to help on the flowers and we need to help as a volunteer and it's a great thing to bring the entire family out. Sometimes it's a tearjerker. I can guarantee you, man. I have set there and read the headstones of veterans who have received the Silver Star or Bronze Star for Valor and fought in World War II or fought in Vietnam war fought in Iraq or fought in the Gulf War. I go around to the back side, and their wife is buried with them right there. I tell you what, it's a very, very humbling moment. To me, that's what Memorial Day is all about. All of our listeners, that's what you need to do. Come out and join us on 15 August here in Colorado, and let's make a difference. And all those other cemeteries. So yeah, I love it.

>> KELLIE POKRIFKA: That's wonderful. How can people get involved in the work you're doing regarding preventing veteran suicide?

>> COL. MIKEL BURROUGHS: We host a ride each year it's called the VFV Ride, it's for any type of motorcycle rider, we don't care if you got a Harley or a Honda or a BMW. We don't care. Any type of motorcycle. You come out, you ride with us. We do a big poker run, we are doing that in about seven or eight states in the nation. Our poker run will be the [indiscernible] of July it starts at Rocky Mountain Harley-Davidson in Littleton. Those guys are great supporter. Rocky Mountain Harleys, great supporters. Kathy and all of her team there, they do so much for veterans. That's where they start. We put in

160 miles, we have a great day. We come back and do 50-50 raffles. We sell T-shirts that talk about the VF of the Ride. We sell challenge coins to keep our veterans alive. We sell patches.

We raise all that money and keep pushing that money into keep bringing up our holistic wellness centers and keep our Warrior For Life Program because that's a free program. We don't charge anybody for that. We want our Veterans to have that service free. All of those things keep our administrative cost low. We have absolutely zero employees. We have no employees. Even the CEO and founder, we are all volunteers. So all of our money goes back into veterans. It goes into the administrator costs, mailing stuff and producing the T-shirts and stuff like that. But we are giving back as much as we can and we have been doing this for four years. We are all volunteers and we're good to keep it that way and keep doing it that way.

And our goal in the next two or three years is to open up 26 wellness centers in major cities across this country that have very, very high veteran population and first responder population. That's our goal. These are all folks who have served our country that are serving right now on the frontlines of COVID-19, our policeman, our firefighters, our EMTs. And a lot of these, there's a high suicide rate amongst first responders and veterans. And we want to provide holistic services. We want to keep them alive. We want to keep them on the frontlines and we want to do everything to save lives. So that's one way right there. People can go on our website and so our challenge coin out there. It costs us five bucks to sell the challenge coin. We sell them for \$10 and ask you to help us with the postage. It's an awesome coin and they can give that to veterans they know that have PTSD or traumatic brain injury. The challenge there is we want you to stay alive.

>> KELLIE POKRIFKA: That is very cool. So with all of your military service, your life experience, these support groups, you have been through and you have seen people at their very worst. And when times seem like you just can't go on. So things like this too shall pass, that's not really helpful. How does one person get through just one more

day? Your darkest times and toughest hours, what gives you the courage to make it through one more day?

>> COL. MIKEL BURROUGHS: Well, I think it's knowing that you're not alone, and that there are so many other veterans out there that are going through the same thing that you're going through. And a lot of them, they don't know how to handle it at first, a lot of them have gotten upset with the VA. The VA has gotten better. Don't get me wrong. I will never downplay the VA. I'm a combat veteran. I go to the VA. I need the VA. But they're so hypervigilant, I don't want to go out in crowds. They go home. They've turned their family off. They have to understand, even at the darkest hour, there are guys like me out there. There are guys like the four or five other facilitators that we have -- which are all veterans, by the way, out there helping other veterans -- that we can share and we can care. We can build that camaraderie. We can be there for you. Just reach out to us. We will talk with you, we will walk with you, I don't care how far away you are. We all are gaining this level of understanding. Because some of these veterans that I have facilitated have gotten through PTSD. I mean, it never goes away, but they learn to manage it and they can help you. Okay? And, we understand. And we've been there. And we've had family members that have died from suicide. So yeah, we're not licensed, we're not the best experts in the world. We are just veterans caring for veterans. Peer to peer support, sharing and scary. That's what it's all about, man. And that's going to make a difference. That's going to make a big difference.

>> KELLIE POKRIFKA: All right, well before we end, I just want to thank all of our veterans, all of our active military, all of their families and all of those who have given their lives. Thank you so much, you always [indiscernible] and please reach out to all of Colonel Mikel Burroughs' services. And thank you.

>> COL. MIKEL BURROUGHS: And thanks for having me, and thanks to Jess and Wayne and all you are doing with Invisible Disabilities. It's a great program, I look forward to our virtual get together here towards the end of the fall. You guys are the bomb. You are doing so much for so many. I'm a contributor and I hope we can find a

lot more contribute out there to make you guys stronger and stronger every day. And I love the ID cards, man. Keep those ID cards going. Let's get going nationally, across the nation on every license plate. Okay, Kellie?

>> KELLIE POKRIFKA: All right, I love it. Thank you so much, and thank you for your service. Happy Memorial Day, everyone.

[END TRANSCRIPT]