



For Immediate Release

Invisible Wounds: Vets battling addiction and trauma pulled back from the brink by Harris County Misdemeanor Veterans Treatment Court

Nov. 11, 2022 — Peter Coleman knew deep down inside that something was wrong.

He had unexplainable rage and a hair trigger. He was drinking a fifth of whiskey every night. And when he tried to sleep, he was jolted awake every hour or so by dreams he couldn't remember.

But Coleman was a U.S. Marine Corps veteran. And Marines weren't weak. They didn't need to talk about their feelings or process what they'd seen and experienced. They pushed through and kept going.

And so did Coleman, refusing for years to acknowledge that he was addicted to alcohol and suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

"That's the mentality of an infantry marine. You're groomed to be that way — to be hardened and desensitized to what you're going to see, what you're going to do, to any kind of emotions," Coleman said. "Emotion causes hesitation. Hesitation kills you."

The 30-year-old combat veteran graduated this fall from Harris County's Misdemeanor Veterans Treatment Court, a second-chance program for veterans facing criminal charges and suffering from long-lasting effects from their time in combat.

Veterans who participate in the intensive and highly structured program must be diagnosed with a mental health disorder or substance abuse issue related to their military service. They also must submit their military discharge status, offense explanation, resume, and non-family recommendations.

The court works hand-in-hand with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to expedite access to treatment. Graduates of the yearlong program often have their cases dismissed and records expunged, giving them a fresh start at a successful, sober life.

"The most rewarding part of the job is this program. It's also the toughest part of the job," said Harris County Criminal Court at Law. No. 4 Judge Shannon Baldwin, who presides over Misdemeanor Veterans Treatment Court. "We really do see people at their lowest. You don't realize how low they are until you start seeing all that's happened to them and hear about all their problems. You don't always get that in regular court. Their whole world is crumbling around them — and you know it."

Completing the mission

Unlike traditional court proceedings, which can feel adversarial, Veterans Treatment Court is more team-oriented, with everyone working together towards a common goal.

The program has four phases. During the first phase, veterans go before the court every two weeks — a time commitment that decreases as they advance through the program. Before each docket, Judge Baldwin meets with the team of caseworkers and attorneys to review each veteran's progress and setbacks. She then meets with each veteran individually.

When speaking with the veterans, Judge Baldwin comes down off the bench and tries to keep the mood light unless the situation warrants otherwise. Even when sanctions must be administered, she does so matter-of-factly. She said she wants the veterans to understand consequences are simply a result of their own choices, which they control.

"I tell them, 'We have a contract now. You have a responsibility to finish the mission. The mission is you complete the program and come out on the other side sober,'" Judge Baldwin said. "'I get to be your cheerleader throughout the entire process until you tell me something different. Then I have to be the judge.'"

For Baldwin, a U.S. Army veteran, the program is personal. Though she didn't see combat, she said she feels the trauma of the unabashed racism and sexism she faced as a 17-year-old girl in the Army in the late 1980s. She also knows the heartbreak of watching her family members suffer from addiction and debilitating post-traumatic stress disorder after returning home from combat.

Volunteering to preside over the court, she said, is a way she can give back.

"They deserve our respect, our helping hand. What they do is selfless," Judge Baldwin said, pointing to the mental manipulation veterans undergo as they're trained not just to fight, but to kill. "If that's how you're trained, why no one thinks they should help you transition back is absurd."

'Maybe I'll die here.'

Coleman has been sober now for two and a half years. He proudly talks about his plans to propose to his girlfriend and move with her to Waco, where they'll get a house together and he'll enroll in EMS and Fire Academy classes at McLennan Community College.

By all accounts, his life is back on track. But the journey to this point has been long, grim, and entangled with the criminal justice system.

"I lost all hope. I didn't care. I wanted to die, but I didn't want to do it with my own hands," he said. "I drank every day because I couldn't look at myself in the mirror because I didn't like who I had become."

Coleman joined the Marines in 2012 as an infantryman, deploying three times in four years — Afghanistan in 2013, Yemen in 2014, and Iraq in 2015. After each deployment, he said, he found himself drinking more. By the end of his third deployment, he was disgruntled and exhausted from the chaos of war and constant mortar attacks.

With his enlistment up in 2016, he had just two weeks to transition from war zone to civilian life. By the time he got home, his drinking was no longer a social activity. He was drinking alone — and heavily — each night.

His first charge of Driving While Intoxicated came in 2017. He was accepted into Misdemeanor Veterans Treatment Court and spent an abbreviated five months at Camp Hope, an intensive residential treatment program for veterans suffering from combat trauma.

Upon his graduation from Misdemeanor Veterans Treatment Court, he celebrated — with a six-pack of beer.

He continued to vacillate between sobriety and relapse, his world ripe with triggers. Being passed over for his dream job as a police officer. Finding himself neck-deep in payday loans he'd taken out to make ends meet. Watching the woman he loved pull away and eventually leave him, stirring deep-seated abandonment issues stemming from his adoption.

Coleman was charged with driving while intoxicated a second time in 2020 after police found him sleeping behind the wheel of his truck, a case of beer stashed next to him. His truck was running but parked — half in a McDonald's parking spot, half in the drive-through.

"I told [the officer], 'There's no point. Just take me.'" Coleman said. "I already knew I was screwed. I thought, maybe, jail is good for me. Maybe I'm supposed to be alone. Maybe I'll die here."

A glimmer of hope

Coleman ultimately found himself back at Camp Hope. His former peers were now his mentors. They had used the time to get better, he said. Meanwhile, here he was — again.

"I thought I was broken beyond repair," he said. "I was suicidal there. But somehow, I still had a glimmer that I wanted to live."

He held onto that shred of hope, letting it drive him through the nine-month residential program. This time, he said, he was doing it for himself. He wanted to get better. He wasn't sure he could survive hitting rock bottom a third time.

As he neared the end of the program, Camp Hope offered him a job as their new night shift coordinator and, soon after, a promotion to night shift manager responsible for a team. At about the same time, he learned he had been accepted once again into Misdemeanor Veterans Treatment Court, an opportunity Coleman considered a gift from God.

Coleman attributes his sobriety to a combination of things — counseling, rehabilitation, Misdemeanor Veterans Treatment Court, Camp Hope, and his faith in God. He is grateful for all of them. But he points to his work at Camp Hope as the catalyst for much of his personal growth.

As night manager, Coleman sits with his fellow veterans when it's dark and quiet and there is too much time to think. He listens to them, makes sure they feel seen, heard, and appreciated, and tries to leave them with a smile. He watches over the weeks as the men find their way back from the brink and slowly come back to life.

He knows these men, he said, because he is these men.

"They help me a lot more than I think I've helped them... because now I've got purpose, something I didn't have for a long time," Coleman said. "I get to be part of these men's lives. That's a gift."

'10,000 times better'

Like Coleman, Matthew Marshall had struggled with alcohol since leaving the U.S. Army in 2009.

Marshall served six years as a logistical specialist, deploying twice — in 2005 to Afghanistan and in 2007 to Iraq, where he was injured. From there, he was transferred to Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, where he remained, undergoing treatment for fractured hands and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Once home, he found it hard to manage life as a civilian. Even simple daily tasks were difficult. So he drank.

The years that followed were bleak. He was in and out of rehab. He tried to commit suicide. He divorced twice. He lost access to his daughters from his first marriage and his son from his second. He was arrested.

"Things got really bad and really dark," the 39-year-old said.

It was his arrest — a charge of making a terroristic threat against his second wife amidst their divorce — that led him to Misdemeanor Veterans Treatment Court. From there, he spent four months in residential rehab programs before going to Oxford House, a sober living home in Houston.

Marshall loved the concept of Oxford House and spent much of his year there volunteering, serving first as chair of the group's Houston chapter and then as regional chapter support chair. Because the house allowed children, his daughters were able to visit.

"That's really what's kept me sober, my service commitments," Marshall said. "I'm a year and a half sober. I've been in Veterans Court this whole entire time. It's another layer of accountability. That's been really great for me."

Recently, Marshall moved from Oxford House to a duplex in West University so he could be close to where his daughters go to school. He's also started Roll Call, an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting for veterans — a first of its kind at the Bellaire Club, a non-profit organization that provides safe space for 12-step meetings.

"It took me 10 years in and out of the [AA] rooms to finally be able to speak up," Marshall said. "Those are safe places, but I've dealt with a lot in my service that these civilians, there is no way they could possibly know."

In November, Marshall graduated from Misdemeanor Veterans Treatment Court. He had no infractions during his year and a half in the program. Now, Marshall is looking to the future.

He hopes to gain partial custody of his daughters and one day be able to once again see his son, who has been out of his life since 2019. He wants to start his own business. And he'd like to see more AA groups for veterans because he knows what a difference they can make.

"I'm a better person knowing I'm an alcoholic and in recovery than before I was [expletive] up by the war. I'm not the center of my own universe anymore," Marshall said, praising Veterans Treatment Court and calling on his fellow veterans to give it a shot.

"If you feel you deserve a chance and you can sit all the way down and be humbled through this process, go for it. Your life is going to change. It's going to be 10,000 times better for it."

Editor's Note: As we celebrate Veteran's Day 2022, Harris County Courts would like to send a special note of thanks to all veterans of the U.S. Armed Forces. We are forever grateful for your service and sacrifice. We join with our community to honor and recognize you not just today, but every day. Thank you for your service.

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