

Bigfork Golf Tournament Nets \$50K for Veterans' Organization

Rebuilding America's Warriors connects veterans with plastic surgeons to fix aesthetic problems after injury

BY MOLLY PRIDDY // AUG 18, 2014 // NEWS & FEATURES

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It wasn't until he woke up at the Walter Reed National Medical Center that Norbie Lara started to feel afraid.

It was 2004, and Lara opened his eyes, and couldn't sit up. He couldn't walk, he couldn't talk, and his right arm was missing.

There was too much adrenaline and training in his system to be afraid when he actually lost his arm in a June 2004 combat patrol in Iraq, Lara said. It was then that an RPG went through the firewall on his patrol vehicle, and through his arm and his lieutenant's arm.

The ensuing explosion lacerated his liver, damaged his lungs and both he and his lieutenant sustained serious brain injuries. Lara, who served in the U.S. Army for more than 11 years and has the rank of sergeant first class, was in a coma for two months.

"When you wake up at Walter Reed and you're missing your arm and you can't walk and you can't talk and you can't sit up, that's when I was scared," Lara said in an interview at the Hilton Garden Inn in Kalispell last week.

Lara stayed at Walter Reed for two years relearning how to live his life, and now, 10 years after the blast, travels the country as a speaker. He has lasting scars from his injuries, but a national organization helped him erase one of the baseball-sized scars on the back of his head.

Rebuilding America's Warriors (RAW), which used to go by the name Iraq Star, helped Lara find and go to a plastic surgeon to help fix some of the scars on the back of his head, all at no cost to the veteran.

He was in the Flathead Valley last weekend to participate in a golf tournament, held on Aug. 16 at Eagle Bend Golf Course, which raised money for RAW.

RAW founder Maggie Lockridge was also in the valley for the fundraiser, organized by Frank Chesnos, which garnered more than \$50,000 for the organization through the golf tournament and a silent auction.

Since its inception in 2007, RAW has connected between 150 and 160 veterans with plastic surgeons to fix aesthetic issues resulting from their service in either Iraq or Afghanistan, resulting in about 450 procedures.

The veterans pay nothing for the services, including travel.

Lockridge, a registered nurse who owned and administrated one of the most well-known plastic surgery aftercare facilities in Beverly Hills, started Iraq Star after watching a documentary on the struggles at Walter Reed in 2007.

She had sold her business in 2005 and wanted a new challenge, Lockridge said, and with a background in military nursing as well, it made sense to her to use her knowledge and connections in the plastic surgery world to help veterans.

"I saw it and thought, 'Now I know what I want to do,'" Lockridge said.

In 2012, Iraq Star became RAW, because the organization was helping veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan, Lockridge said.

RAW's mission is to prevent the wars from "permanently disfiguring young lives," and Lockridge now counts 338 surgeons and dentists around the country as volunteers who give their time and talent to help the veterans.

Along with working on scars, Lockridge said her organization has also taken on the dental problems arising for veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many of them have picked up a bacteria that erodes and kills the teeth, she said, giving them the look commonly associated with meth users.

This brings down their self-esteem, she said, causing fewer smiles, more beards, less eating, weight loss, and other affects, like tough times at job interviews.

Lara said removing physical scars can help a veteran on his or her path to healing the invisible scars, because better self-esteem leads to better emotional and mental health.

"I used to wear hats all the time because I was embarrassed of my scars," he said.

He got in touch with Lockridge about two years ago, and she set up all of his appointments – "the surgeon's office actually called me instead of me calling them," he said – and he got a scar removed.

There are plans to take care of the rest of his scars, which Lockridge made sure of during an Aug. 15 chat in Kalispell. She's invested in making sure the veterans quickly get the help they need, she said.

The surgeons donate their time, and RAW pays for the anesthetics and travel costs. Lockridge said donations from the public are the "lifeblood" of the organization, because she doesn't use federal grants.

Fundraisers for RAW usually bring in between \$8,000 and \$15,000, so an event raising more than \$50,000 is a big deal for the organization.

"This is a very special (fundraiser)," she said of the Aug. 16 golf tournament.

Working with the veterans has been an enriching experience as well, she said.

"These guys are so terrific," Lockridge said. "They spur me on all the time."

Lara, who took up golf after losing his arm and participated in the weekend tournament, said he still has some problems with memory loss, but has made a career out of speaking and traveling.

It's been 10 years since he woke up at Walter Reed, and there's still work to do. But Lara is confident he can take it on.

"I'm a very blessed man," Lara said.

For more information on RAW, including how to donate, visit www.rebuildingamericaswarriors.org.

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