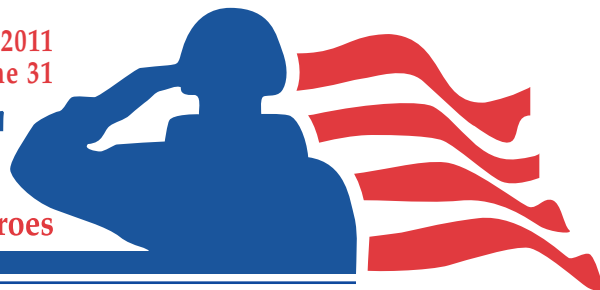


THE ROAD TO RECOVERY REPORT

March 2011
Volume 31



An Update for Supporters of the Coalition to Salute America's Heroes

Providing
Emergency Aid
to Troops Severely
Wounded in
Afghanistan or Iraq

Key Programs:

Emergency
Financial Aid

Family Support
Network

Career Network

Road to Recovery
Conference & Tribute

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Special Hero.....8

Wounded troops call Road to Recovery Conference 'awesome,' tell donors 'Can't thank you enough'

One hundred severely wounded troops plus their families heard inspirational speeches, explored job opportunities, made new friendships and even got a surprise \$500 Christmas gift check at the Coalition's Sixth

Annual Road to Recovery Conference in Orlando.

"All the motivational speeches help me to cope and make me feel like I am not alone out there," said Gabriel Ledesma, a wounded serviceman from Bethesda, Maryland.

Including spouses and children, about 475 people attended the four-day, all-expense-paid event, which was held at the Walt Disney World Swan Resort in Orlando starting on December 12.

Major General John K. Singlaub, U.S. Army (Ret.), national spokesman for the Coalition, said, "This event gets better every year, and I am deeply thankful to our donors. You're not just changing lives – you may be saving lives."

Highlights included:

- ▶ An opening night performance by actor Gary Sinise, star of "CSI: NY," and his "Lt. Dan Band."
- ▶ Breakout sessions on how to get VA benefits; individual and family counseling; and a special, first-time seminar on two health problems plaguing returning warriors: traumatic brain injury (TBI) and post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Wounded troops were also offered the opportunity to be



Severely wounded troops and their families express thanks to Coalition supporters who made the event possible.

tested for both.

▶ A Career Fair, which included a resume writing class and featured major employers like Northrop Grumman, General Motors, Tricare/Humana, T-Mobile, the State Department and the CIA.

"I just got a job from the conference," said Michael Dunn, a wounded soldier from Apopka, Florida. "Road to Recovery is awesome!"

The general session featured a panel discussion led by Coalition spokespeople who are wounded troops themselves. They shared their often-painful experiences and offered attendees advice on how to handle the problems they are going through.

"Many people feel like they're the only one going through these things," said one wounded serviceman. "But then you hear other people's stories and it gives you a feeling of connection – a feeling that I'm not by myself anymore."

As with past conferences, all wounded servicemen and women received free passes to Walt Disney World so they could spend time with their children.

But most disabled troops said their best experience was the camaraderie they felt by meeting others in their situation.

"Leaving the Marine Corps was one of the hardest things I've had to do," said one disabled serviceman. "I finally feel that sense of camaraderie and brotherhood that was taken from me." ■

Providing Emergency Aid to Troops Severely Wounded in Afghanistan or Iraq

Coalition to Salute America's Heroes ★ PO Box 96440 ★ Washington, DC 20090-6440 ★ www.saluteheroesproject.org



IN THEIR OWN WORDS



Coalition donors 'Put a tear in my eye' by supporting Road to Recovery Conference



▶ R2R is great. I pleaded to come because I was so down in the dumps. I feel like I've been cut off. Old friends haven't stuck with me. Need to prove I'm not alone and build relationships with other wounded vets. If I'm going to start my life anew, it can begin here. You can't beat CSAH. No other organization does what they do.

— *Ricardo Perez, Boerne, Texas*

▶ The Road to Recovery Conference helped me ease my transition to civilian life and also helped me to find a lot of resources to cope with my injuries and disabilities. In addition, I could get my career started by networking with a lot of companies. All the motivational speeches help me to cope and make me feel like I am not alone out there.

— *Gabriel L., Bethesda, Maryland*

▶ A year ago, I hit bottom. Attempted suicide for the 3rd time. Needed to wake up. R2R has done a good job of combining the information with recreation. It was beneficial to be around others who experienced what I've been through. Felt very open and free. Felt comfortable and safe. Made some great new friendships. Came to the realization that I need help to cope from day to day when I go back home.

— *Jarod M., Round Rock, Texas*

▶ My wife convinced me to come to this. She works part-time and we have 2 kids. My wife's job pays for food but we don't have anything extra. We are using the Road to Recovery Conference as our family's Christmas and it is a Christmas blessing. Also the camaraderie of being with everyone is amazing. I was happy with meeting other troops like me and it helps me to be able to talk to other people going through what I have. My wife was not in the military so she doesn't completely understand what I go through. Being here makes me want to be a part of what CSAH does.

— *Gary Wynn, Seminole, Florida*

▶ The Coalition has done so many things for us. Here at the Road to Recovery Conference we've met several



Gabriel Monreal lost his leg in a firefight with Taliban insurgents while serving in Afghanistan. Monreal says coming to the Road to Recovery Conference "definitely helped us heal."

families just like us and made friends for life. It brings us closer. Best thing about conference is the whole family is invited. It's important my caregiver, my spouse, is here to get the support she needs. My wife does all the things I can't. The Road to Recovery Conference has helped us find the resources we need. It takes a burden off to be a part of something like this and we can continue to grow and heal together. CSAH is doing the work of God.

— *Tee Jay S., Haines City, Hawaii*

▶ Came to the Road to Recovery Conference not knowing what to expect. We've learned so much and seen how much people care! Putting a whole bunch of wounded troops together to talk to each other is great. Look into someone's eyes and know he feels what you feel. Definitely helps us heal. Organizations like CSAH are amazing. That's what makes America America. People who give hundreds of dollars or thousands of dollars or even 1 or 2 dollars are awesome. I would give up my legs; would give up my healthy body in a heartbeat because so many others did it for me. This is a great country. No other country like it. CSAH is a phenomenal organization.

— *Gabriel Monreal, Corpus Christi, Texas*

▶ I don't believe military families are entitled to anything extra. When people recognize our service it's nice to know Americans are thankful for what we've done. Road to Recovery was a blessing. Kids have never been to Disney. Conference makes it so much easier for us to get the help we need. Can't thank enough.

— *Kathy Horman (spouse), Jacksonville, Florida*

▶ Puts a tear in my eye to know there are people out there who are willing to fund this event. Would like to thank donors for generous donations. I would give them a hug and say thanks so much for this. God bless you.

— *Felix Garcia, Palm Coast, Florida*

▶ I've had issues sleeping and eating. Deteriorated to the point where I would sleep an hour a night. I didn't go out. At the Road to Recovery I met other people like me. I stopped feeling sorry for myself and blaming myself.



IN THEIR OWN WORDS



To all the people who donate, you are wonderful and selfless. I hope to be in a position someday to give something. From my family and myself, we thank you.

— *Dexter Fortune, Ocala, Florida*

▶ Words can't describe what this Coalition has done for me and family. I finally feel a sense of peace, and a feeling of "getting back on track." Leaving the Marine Corps was one of the hardest things I've had to do (and everything that came with it). I finally feel that sense of camaraderie and brotherhood that was taken from me. The Coalition has been wonderfully supportive and lets me know that there are others out there like me and that I have a much broader network of support out there. I can't thank them enough!

— *Joseph R. Bitz, Tampa, Florida*

▶ Being here at the Road to Recovery Conference has been a blessing and just saying thank you is not enough for what you all have done for me. May God always guide and bless you. God bless you all in the name of Jesus.

— *Vernon W., Tampa, Florida*

▶ The Coalition's Road to Recovery Conference provided an environment for families to share experiences as to how recovery is going for them and for all involved to learn from each other. Great mechanism to provide a "one stop shop" to provide assistance. A veteran retiring in 2002 received a lot less support than one retiring in 2010.

— *Levi R., San Antonio, Texas*

▶ It has been great for our family. We have been able to reunite since we are separated right now due to my husband's treatment. My kids love that it is at Disney and the information has been very helpful.

— *Penny V. (spouse), Wilmington, North Carolina*

▶ Jorge DeLeon told me about Road to Recovery. CSAH provided a variety of great information for soldiers still on active duty, transitioning, or retired. What it offers a family by holding the conference at Walt Disney World is awesome.

— *Matt M., Rochester, Washington*

▶ The Coalition Road to Recovery has given me new inspiration to keep moving forward. Their guest speakers on day 3 made me realize I am not alone and there is help available.

— *Travis J. Harvey, Cocoa, Florida*

▶ Being here with fellow military has helped greatly. I have learned more here in a short time asking questions. I have asked many VA personnel and other places how to do things or get help with problems with little success. This is great!

— *Mark Grodsky, Ocoee, Florida*



A roadside bomb explosion in southwest Afghanistan claimed the lives of four of Levi R.'s teammates and left him with severe burns and massive internal injuries. The Road to Recovery Conference allowed him and his family to "share experiences as to how recovery is going for them and for all involved to learn from each other."

▶ It was great to get down here and see that I'm not alone in my issues/problems. It also helped in making decisions about the future and knowing I'm not alone.

— *Jeremiah Couner, Palm Harbor, Florida*

▶ WOW! I couldn't believe I was able to take this free vacation. I met other vets who've gone through the same thing as I have and was able to find support and camaraderie. At the conference I picked up important info I missed from other organizations.

— *Michael Blount, Naples, Florida*

▶ This trip was very important. We learned a lot about the different benefits and organizations that can and will help the vets. The Coalition is doing wonderful things. Keep up the good work.

— *Charles Armstead, Killeen, Texas*

▶ WOW! To our surprise we were accepted! What an opportunity. I knew it was meant to be. I am so thankful to be able to be here. I have gotten so much out of this opportunity. It's been informative, moving, and powerful.

— *Kayla C. (spouse), San Diego, California*

▶ The Coalition to Salute America's Heroes Road to Recovery Conference opened my eyes to the reality of my disability and opened some great doors to start recovery and acceptance.

— *Joshua Anderson, Port St. Lucie, Florida*

★ ★ ★ ★ 2010 ROAD TO RECOVERY CONFERENCE ★ ★ ★ ★

Coalition's 2010 Road to Recovery Conference &



Wounded servicemen and women and



Thanks to generous Coalition to Salute America's Heroes donors, 100 severely wounded troops plus their families enjoyed the 2010 Road to Recovery Conference & Tribute.

Brent "Hoss" Hendrix, shown here registering for the conference, passed up a college football scholarship to serve his country. While in Iraq his vehicle ran over a massive roadside bomb. Brent lost his right leg and had 66 surgeries. ▶



Panel discussions led by severely wounded troops gave attendees the chance to relate their own stories and realize they are not alone in having troubles along the Road to Recovery. ▼



▲ Motivational speakers and question-and-answer sessions lifted the spirits and broadened the knowledge of severely wounded troops and their families.



★★★★★ 2010 ROAD TO RECOVERY CONFERENCE ★★★★★

Tribute called 'awesome' experience

★★★
their families learn, laugh and heal at four-day educational event in Orlando



▲ *Michael Dunn says he was hired after meeting with employers at the Coalition's Career Fair. "Road to Recovery is awesome," he says. "I wanted to give up but the Conference inspired me to keep going."*

▲ *Many children of our disabled troops have also suffered as a result of their parents' injuries in Afghanistan or Iraq. While attending the Road to Recovery Conference they got the chance to see Walt Disney World, and their parents got the chance to spend some care-free time with their families.*



Severely wounded troops trying to re-enter the work force attended the Career Fair, where they met recruiters from General Motors, Northrop Grumman, T-Mobile and other large companies.

By the numbers: Your generosity at work



Here's a brief sampling of severely wounded troops who have been helped by your generous donations to the Coalition to Salute America's Heroes.

- Sgt. Stephen K. of Poplar Bluff, Missouri needed \$5,292.32 to pay his back rent, car payment and insurance, and put groceries in his pantry.
▶ **Coalition Paid: \$5,292.32**
- Sgt. Erich H. of Cincinnati, Ohio had to find \$3,000 to put down a deposit and pay first month's rent on a new home.
▶ **Coalition Paid: \$3,000.00**
- Sgt. Brent N. of Overland, Kansas recently returned with a severe injury suffered while serving in Afghanistan. He faced \$1,194.58 in overdue utility bills and car repairs.
▶ **Coalition Paid: \$1,194.58**
- A painful back injury suffered while serving in Iraq made Sgt. Jeff W. of Lebanon, Missouri late on car payments totaling \$1,395.98. He also needed another \$3,485.80 for car repairs.
▶ **Coalition Paid: \$4,881.78**
- Marine Lance Cpl. Christopher W. of Worcester, Massachusetts served tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. He needed \$4,114.98 for a deposit and rent on a new place to live, car repairs and food.
▶ **Coalition Paid: \$4,114.98**
- Sgt. John P. of Fowlerville, Michigan faced having the heat turned off in his home. He needed \$1,371.34 to get his bills caught up.
▶ **Coalition Paid: \$1,371.34**
- Sgt. Oliver M. of Southaven, Mississippi had to make a mortgage payment of \$1,112.51.
▶ **Coalition Paid: \$1,112.51**
- Sgt. Joseph D. of Hopkinsville, Kentucky couldn't pay his rent or even buy food. He needed \$1,889.98 to catch up on his rent and buy groceries.
▶ **Coalition Paid: \$1,889.98**
- After suffering painful burns while serving in Iraq, Sgt. James W. of San Antonio, Texas needed \$1,509.31 to make an overdue payment on his mortgage.
▶ **Coalition Paid: \$1,509.31**
- Sgt. Levi W. of McKinney, Texas is a double amputee after suffering severe wounds while serving in Iraq. He needed \$1,587 to make overdue rent payments.
▶ **Coalition Paid: \$1,587.00**
- Spc. Robert L. of Boise, Idaho suffered multiple injuries to his elbow, back, shoulder and spine while serving in Iraq. He needed \$2,475.62 to fix his means of transportation.
▶ **Coalition Paid: \$2,475.62**
- Staff Sgt. Caroline T. of Des Moines, Iowa had \$1,129.13 in back mortgage payments hanging over her head.
▶ **Coalition Paid: \$1,129.13**
- Marine Lance Cpl. Aaron K. of Bellefonte, Pennsylvania had a stack of bills he couldn't pay. He needed \$3,702.14 to square his accounts with various utilities and back rent.
▶ **Coalition Paid: \$3,702.14**
- Staff Sgt. Michael C. of Cahokia, Illinois needed \$1,458.10 for overdue utility and other bills and rent.
▶ **Coalition Paid: \$1,458.10**
- Marine Cpl. Joshua A. was injured while serving in Iraq. He called and needed \$3,750 to pay back rent.
▶ **Coalition Paid: \$3,750.00**
- Cpl. Barry L. shattered his forearms while serving in Afghanistan. He needed \$1,585 to pay his rent.
▶ **Coalition Paid: \$1,585.00**
- Cpl. Aaron H. returned from serving in Iraq with a serious injury. He was \$1,450 behind in his rent payments and called the Coalition for help.
▶ **Coalition Paid: \$1,450.00**

★ ★ ★ *THANK YOU CARD PROGRAM IN ACTION* ★ ★ ★

Donor 'Thank You' card program lifts spirits of severely wounded troops, families



Severely wounded troops and their families who attended the 2010 Road to Recovery Conference in Orlando witnessed a “wall of patriotic support” in the form of two huge bulletin boards plastered with hundreds of THANK YOU and GET WELL cards from well-wishers who support the Coalition.

Usually our severely wounded heroes receive greeting cards while sitting in their hospital bed or while recovering at home. Coalition staffers thought it would be uplifting for them to see hundreds of cards all at once from the grateful Americans who sponsored the Road to Recovery Conference.

The greeting cards tacked to the bulletin boards were a sampling of the same ones that had been signed and mailed back by the estimated 600,000 Americans who have



Coalition supporters have sent hundreds of thousands of THANK YOU and GET WELL cards to severely wounded servicemen and women all across the nation. Here an attendee at the December Road to Recovery Conference in Orlando looks at a fraction of the cards the Coalition receives.

Coalition supporters.

“The support is a real blessing to me,” writes Conference attendee Air Force Staff Sgt. Destiny Gray-Hern of Moreno Valley, California. “[The donor’s] sacrifices to help vets helps me to feel I’m worth something.” ■

supported the Coalition.

The organization’s innovative Thank You Card Program was created as a way for Americans to show their patriotic support firsthand to servicemen and women who have suffered serious injuries while serving in Afghanistan or Iraq.

Many disabled servicemen and women who attended the Road to Recovery Conference were so moved by the “wall of patriotic support” that before departing they put pen to paper and wrote thank you letters of their own to the

More creative ways you can help our troops severely wounded in Afghanistan or Iraq this Easter

Volunteer at a Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical Center near you. Your skilled hands and warm heart are needed by our patients to heal, progress and be comfortable. Hospital employees will also be grateful for your assistance and will pay careful attention to finding tasks to match your skills and abilities.

Other ways to volunteer include: Volunteering your time as a caregiver for a few hours to give the spouse of a severely disabled service member a much-needed break; offering to run errands for a wounded soldier or his/her spouse; or mentoring or tutoring wounded troops who need to develop new skills for job training.

Take a wounded serviceman or woman out to a movie, sporting event or other activity. You can help a seriously injured service member forget about their pain for awhile, and perhaps even help in their mental and emotional recovery, by getting them out of their home or hospital for an afternoon or evening.

Financial worries drive wounded hero to brink of suicide



“I hit rock bottom, financially speaking,” Jason recalls. “We had nothing, no income of any kind. My pride was hurt so bad that I couldn’t ask for help.

When Army Sgt. Jason Brunson shipped off to Iraq in 2005, his wife Barbara’s greatest fear was he would never return.

Jason did return – sort of.

The post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) he suffered along with his battle injuries has changed his personality profoundly.

“He’s not the same man I married 15 years ago,” Barbara says. “PTSD and TBI (traumatic brain injury) have changed him. I have to deal with mood swings. I don’t know if he’s happy one day to the next. I don’t sleep. He withdraws from the family and wants to be by himself.”

Jason is one of the few U.S. troops in Iraq who got injured “on purpose,” as he puts it.

Sgt. Brunson and his fellow soldiers were engaged in a firefight with Iraqi insurgents, and Jason was driving a military vehicle.

Suddenly he saw a suicide bomber approaching – in a much larger truck.

“I jerked the wheel and smashed into him head-on, on purpose,” Jason says.

His heroic act stopped the suicide bomber, but Jason paid a very high price.

“The impact severed my stomach from my esophagus,” he says. “I lost my gall bladder, injured my neck and back and suffered a traumatic brain injury.”

It wasn’t until after returning home that he realized he had post traumatic stress disorder.



Army Sgt. Jason Brunson (Ret.), was driving a military vehicle in Iraq when he saw a suicide bomber approaching in a much larger truck. “I jerked the wheel and smashed into him, head-on, on purpose,” Jason says. Jason’s heroic act stopped the suicide bomber.

And he agrees with Barbara that he is a different man than he used to be.

“At one point my wife and children were afraid of me,” he admits. “She has dealt with a lot during this ordeal but has stuck by me.

“I have an 11-year-old and a 20-year-old. They have had a lot of heartache seeing their father change like I have since I have been back.”

Like many severely wounded troops, Jason’s injuries led to financial problems.

After being released from the hospital in May 2009, the couple went four months with no income.

“I hit rock bottom, financially speaking,” Jason recalls. “We had nothing, no income of any kind. My pride was hurt so bad that I couldn’t ask for help.

“I decided I was going to commit suicide. I took my 9mm pistol out. It took my wife, dad and oldest son to

take my gun away from me.”

A short time later Barbara found the Coalition to Salute America’s Heroes website and asked for help.

Coalition donors provided them with four months’ rent, money for groceries and a \$500 Christmas gift card.

“If it had not been for the assistance of the Coalition, we probably would have been homeless,” Jason says.

“My appreciation and thanks could go on forever. Thank you, CSAH, for your support of me and my family and others like me.” ■