



# HEROES THANKING HEROES

Hi, my name is Melissa Cole. I live in Paris, TX with my husband of almost eight years, Don Cole. He is a veteran of the U.S. Army. Our story is a little different than most.

Don was deployed to Iraq in March 2003 through March 2004 as a refueler - which meant they were at the gate every day. In other words, a target. During this deployment, he was shot at almost daily. He had two IEDs hit his truck with luckily no major injuries. He did suffer from a concussion. Don's second deployment was from December 2004 through December 2005. One afternoon while walking back to his room a mortar round hit about 10 to 15 feet in front of him. He was thrown to the ground. Upon coming to and standing up he realized he was bleeding. A rock hit his head, above his eye, resulting in another concussion.



He told me once that "he's thankful he was there at the time, because there was a female soldier who was small and his body took the impact. With this, she had no injuries." That's my husband, he has downplayed all of the sights he saw, the injuries he sustained, and the toll the war has left him to deal with for the rest of his life. Don suffers from PTSD like most do that have been to war.

**PTSD is ugly. It can turn the kindest people into people they are not.**

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Don and I met in 2014. I was aware he served. I also understood the clinical description of PTSD from being a nurse. However, until you have seen it affect a person firsthand you never really understand. During the first year of our marriage, I saw all the things PTSD can do to a person. For starters, so many nights he would wake up on the floor, or scream out, cry, and moan in his sleep. As time went by, I could listen to his breathing and see the chill bumps on his skin. I knew he was about to have an episode. So, with trial and error, I wanted to find a way to awaken him without startling him.

If I startled him, I learned quickly he would swing, or grab me so tight I couldn't get out of his grasp. Once he awakened, he had no clue anything had happened. So finally, I figured out that when his breathing shifted I could call his name softly, stroke his arm, tell him he was ok and I was right beside him. He would then wake calmly and the outcome was much different. Yet, we still daily fight the PTSD demon in other aspects of life. Especially with his driving. It is a huge trigger that I didn't realize for a long time. Which led to many arguments. When he sits in a crowded room, he can have a burst of anger with a short temper.

*Not all injuries are on the outside  
and visual for others to see in plain  
sight.*

This is where our story is different. 2015 to mid-2017 was by far the highlight of our marriage. We were raising a blended family of 4 daughters, and we were super busy with all the things. I was a full-time nurse. Don was working, and I convinced him to go back to college for his degree.



**CONNECT WITH US ON SOCIAL MEDIA!**







*Always have a willing  
hand to help someone,  
you might be the only  
one that does.*

*—Roy T. Bennett*

Our daughters were very active. They played soccer, basketball, and volleyball... one football, and two showed pigs in FFA. They were smart and always busy! We took our last family vacation in August 2017. I can remember this because it was the last time I felt like myself. September I started to feel very ill. After many doctor visits, testing, and ER visits, by October I was not able to speak properly or walk. My vision was mostly gone.

My neurologist was performing some tests in his office and quickly realized that the radiologist had read my MRI wrong in early October, and I have what is called Idiopathic Intracranial Hypertension. It was now the end of November and all the pressure for so long had taken its toll on me. They quickly scheduled me for brain surgery. After a VP shunt was placed I spent 8 days in the ICU. During the months leading up to the surgery I had a small stroke on the right side of my brain. I am left side affected. I am permanently disabled.

That December was a blur. We were financially devastated, we had been part of the CVMA, and Don reached out to them to see if they knew of any organizations that could help. As faith would have it. One of the members of the CVMA was also a Coalition member. I can't remember exactly how it all played out because I was very ill but this is what I know happened. Don reached out to the Coalition to Salute Americas Heroes. They helped us with so much! They helped pay bills, and provided for Christmas gifts for my daughters that year.

What a huge relief! A few months later our CVMA chapter suffered a loss and I met Mrs. Antoinette Batchelor. This was the very first time I had been out since surgery. My hair was growing back, I was weak, I had a tremor, and the list goes on. Antoinette was so sweet. She told me about some resources and encouraged Don and I to apply for the Heroes Freedom Weekend trip they had coming up (a marriage retreat for Veteran couples.) We were chosen to go to New York in September of that year.

For me and Don it was much more. I met so many people just like me with TBIs. It was a safe little group. It was ok for Don and myself to be the broken people we were. We built friendships that will last a lifetime. We kept in touch with the Coalition through Facebook, trying to navigate life after my brain injury.

The next few years were the hardest. I mourned my old body, being a nurse, being active in life the way I was before. I was angry, and probably hard to live with. Don was stressed and trying to support someone that didn't want anything other than her life back. Then out of the blue, I received a message about a couples zoom meeting that had a counselor through the Coalition. Don and I agreed to attend. We saw some familiar faces, but most of all the advice we received saved our marriage. The tools we were given led me to seek out ways to change myself and help our marriage.

## HEROES FREEDOM WEEKEND 2022

This year we attended another Freedom Weekend in Virginia. The speaker spoke to Don and I so deeply. Everything I had been telling Don I thought we needed to be doing was validated by Dr. Johnny Parker. After the first group session, we went back to our hotel room and just stared at each other in disbelief. God has given us the Coalition. We lived the next few days inside our bubble with the Coalition family.



## "WE ARE BETTER TOGETHER!"

When we returned, I prayed God would allow me to work. Not just work I wanted a job with gratitude, because living a life of gratitude leads to so much more. Again, my sweet angel Antoinette messaged me in August that the Hero's Thanking Heroes program had some openings. I was quick to send emails and prepared to do my best to get this job. Oh, how I didn't know the wonderful people I was about to encounter as I was officially hired into the call center. Every single person in this organization has been a blessing.

We are a family. We laugh, we cry and most of all we have each other. Don still struggles with PTSD, and we as a couple are developing coping methods for him. We started woodworking to give me something to do, but it turned out to be therapeutic for him as well. He builds flags, cornhole boards, etc. He has changed jobs and is no longer driving a truck every day, but he must work out of town. Thankfully I can work anywhere, and I can go stay with him because we are better together.

### October Is National Depression and Mental Health Screening Month

**SAMHSA'S NATIONAL HELPLINE IS A FREE, CONFIDENTIAL, 24/7, 365-DAY-A-YEAR TREATMENT REFERRAL AND INFORMATION SERVICE FOR INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES FACING MENTAL AND/OR SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS.**




### RETIRING YOUR BOOTS BLOG



"The world is filled with people who, no matter what you do, simply don't like you. The world is also filled with people who will love you fiercely. The ones who support you and lift you up - those are your people, so be who you are."

To Read the Entire Blog "Friendly Fire"  
[CLICK HERE.](#)

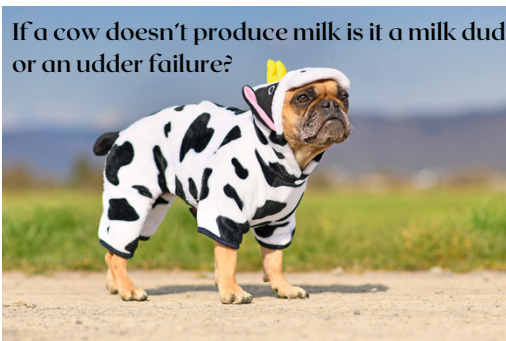
## Employment Resources

-  CONNECTS VETERANS TO CIVILIAN OPPORTUNITIES  
YOUR GUIDE TO CIVILIAN SUCCESS™
- COMPLETE MILITARY-TO-CIVILIAN TRANSITION SUPPORT
- RECRUITMILITARY HAS BEEN SELECTED BY THE U.S ARMY TO CONNECT SOLDIERS TO CAREERS
- 4 MUST-HAVE ITEMS ON YOUR RESUME



**MADE**  
**YA**  
**LAUGH**

If a cow doesn't produce milk is it a milk dud or an udder failure?



## Food Distributions

*Battling food insecurity one box at a time.*



Between September and October, 4 food distributions took place with 2 more coming this month. In partnership with Feed the Children and Blue Star Families, we are helping hundreds of Military and Veteran families in need. To learn more, or get involved, [click here](#).

**Next up:**

**OCTOBER 28, 29: PALMS, CALIFORNIA**  
**NOVEMBER 5: SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH**

## Fundraisers

**Still Time to Contribute!**

**CLOSES October 29**

**America's Little Helpers Book Drive**

*Our hope is to raise enough funds to purchase 100 educational & motivational books for the members of America's Little Helpers and spread the gift of literacy with smiles and hope through the mail.*

**Walmart SPARK GOOD**

*Support us every time you shop by donating spare change when you automatically round up your orders to the nearest dollar at checkout.*



# America's Little Helpers

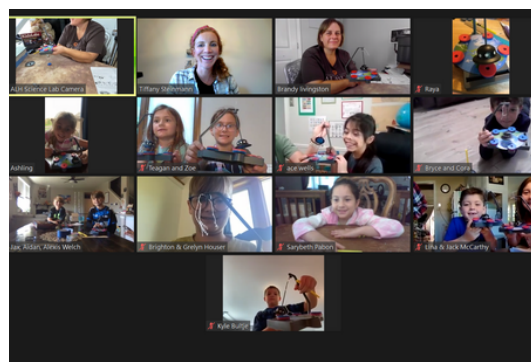


Thank you so much for my gift, it really lifted my spirits after my hospital stay. The ALH program is awesome!  
-MASON B

## September's Online Events



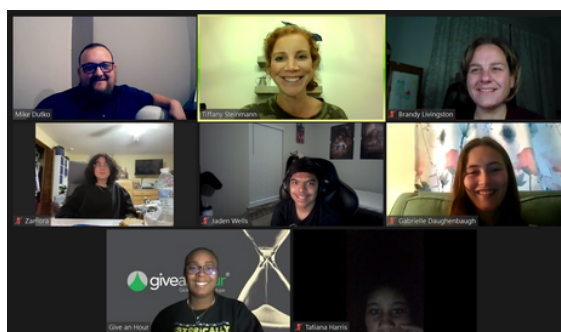
**Let's Cook! Middle School**



**Science Lab for 2nd-5th Graders**



**Tea Party Ages 3-1st Grade**



**Give an Hour Mental Health Night  
High School-College**

We covered all the bases in September! From Science to Cooking and Tea with our littlest helpers, there was something for everyone. In partnership with Give an Hour, our older members enjoyed a night in building personal skills to overcome challenges faced in everyday life. We are proud of everyone and each month is an opportunity to strengthen our bond and learn new skills!



America's Little Helper's Program Leaders Tiffany Steinmann and Brandy Livingston alongside Coalition's Founder and CEO David Walker and Elizabeth Dole Foundation's Founder and CEO Steve Schwab attended the annual "Heroes & History Makers Gala" celebrating our Nations Caregivers.

