



Veterans Families United honors vets

James Coburn

The Edmond Sun

EDMOND— Three years ago, Operation Iraqi Freedom war veteran Joe Collins was so sick with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder that fear kept him prone on his bathroom floor for five days.

Eleven months ago, Collins told The Edmond Sun it had been too hard for him to be around other men like himself with PTSD. Seeing the stages of their disorders reminded him of his own pain.

Saturday afternoon, Collins was among the nearly 60 veterans attending the Veterans Day Appreciation Luncheon and Welcome Home Warrior Citizen Award Ceremony in Oklahoma City. Collins' decision to attend the luncheon was the first time he'd joined a crowd of people in two years.

"I felt it was important to push myself to something like this because I knew it was an important event," Collins said. "And so I decided I've got to get back on the horse somehow. And I felt it was important for me to be here and show them my face, not only to support them, but for my own recovery as well."

The luncheon was sponsored by Veterans' Families United with two purposes. It explained the mission of what Veterans' Families United offers the community before a Welcome Home Warrior Citizen Award Ceremony for the 353rd and the 401st Engineering Group Command of the Army Reserves.

In addition, Misty Jobe of the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services spoke about Oklahoma Family Veterans Peer Support Groups, funded by the state. The support groups are not run by clinicians but by the families and combat veterans themselves.

Veterans' Families United Foundation was founded in December by Collins' mother — 2006 Oklahoma Mother of the Year Cynde Collins-Clark. The organization provides compassionate, holistic resources to encourage healing from combat trauma and a healthy transition from military service to civilian life, Clark said.

PTSD is a normal reaction to a traumatic experience that could be experienced by almost anyone, according to the Veterans Center in Oklahoma City. A study published in the February issue of The Journal of the American Medical Association cites 12 percent of Iraq veterans have been diagnosed with related mental disorders.

U.S. Army Reserve Spc. Collins served honorably after volunteering for active duty in Operation Iraqi Freedom. He returned from Iraq in April 2004, after a year of service.

The Edmond Santa Fe High School graduate was with the 353rd Engineer Group of the Army Reserves in Oklahoma. He volunteered to serve as a heavy machine and generator mechanic and escort in Iraq with the 285th Engineer Co., U.S. Army Reserves out of Baton Rouge, La. Now, his PTSD has cost him his home, job and peace of mind. He is cared for by his mother and stepfather in their Edmond home.

Clark shared with the audience how PTSD impacted her family life when her son returned home. Clark has a part-time counseling practice in Edmond and is a counselor at Metro Technology Center in Oklahoma City. Her husband Jim teaches carpentry at Metro Technology Center. The couple married 10 years ago and, between them, have six adult children.

"I have an awareness for the first time of the many battles fought before that had created and preserved this precious homeland," she said. "I recognize that when a soldier goes to war, so does his family. And when he comes home, and after the celebration and safe return, there are many changes," Clark said.

She said her son's journey is one of understanding the true price of freedom.

"I'm making some improvements," Collins said. "Over time, I've been able to get out of my room a little bit and take small walks. After three years, finally the fog's lifting a little bit."

THE DETAILS

What you need to know

To learn more about Veterans' Families United Foundation, call 535-1925 or visit www.VeteransFamiliesUnited.org. For information about the Oklahoma Family Veterans Peer Support Groups, call Misty Jobe at 248-8602 or e-mail her at mjobe@odmhsas.org.

Veterans day

Holiday closings

City of Edmond offices will be closed Monday in observance of Veteran's Day.

Utility customer service centers also will be closed. However, trash collection will remain as scheduled.

Oklahoma County offices will be closed Monday and reopen Tuesday.

Local Post Offices are closed Monday and there will be no mail delivery on Veteran's Day.

The Edmond Sun will be delivered Monday as scheduled.

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Photos



DREW HARMON | The Edmond Sun An American flag ornament stands on a table in front of Sgt. First Class Michael England and his foster daughter, Kaylee, Saturday at a Veterans Day luncheon put on by Veterans' Families United in south Oklahoma City.



DREW HARMON | The Edmond Sun Founder Cynde Collins-Clark speaks at the Veterans' Families United luncheon Saturday in south Oklahoma City. The Veterans Day luncheon honored the 353rd and the 401st Engineering Group Command of the Army Reserves.



DREW HARMON | The Edmond Sun Col. Garth Anderson, commander of the 353rd Engineering Group of the U.S. Army Reserves, looks over the welcome table Saturday morning before the Veterans' Families United luncheon.