# *Borne the Battle*

*Episode # 122 Sarah Verardo—Caregiver, CEO of Independence Fund*

*Hosted by Tim Lawson*

# (Text Transcript Follows)

[00:00:00] Music

# **[00:00:10] OPENING MONOLOGUE:**

**Timothy Lawson (TL):** Wednesday, November 28, 2018. This is *Borne the Battle*, brought to you by the Department of Veterans’ Affairs. I’m your host, Marine Corps Veteran, Timothy Lawson. Hope everybody is doing well out there. We are in the beginning of the holiday season, right? ‘Cuz the holiday season is Thanksgiving towar . . . to, to the end of the year, right? I think that we consider that holiday season, so I guess we are sorta to the front of it. December is upon us and I’m sitting here wondering, “Where the heck did 2018 go?” My goodness did that go by quickly! A couple things of interest on our side. [facebook.com/VeteransAffairs/](https://www.facebook.com/VeteransAffairs/) [Link to VA’s Facebook page] is where you can follow us on Facebook. You’ll notice today, November 28th, that we shared a Facebook live event from the Chickasaw Nation. They hosted a Veteran’s town hall that Secretary Wilkie spoke at. So, if you want to see, if you want to see that event, if you want to hear Secretary Wilkie’s remarks, simply go to [facebook.com/VeteransAffairs/](https://www.facebook.com/VeteransAffairs/) [Link to VA’s Facebook page]. You will see the feed that we shared and Secretary Wilkie at the podium providing his remarks. Also, through the end of the weekend, we’re going to be sharing segments from the recent episode of *The American Veteran*. *The American Veteran* is a compilation of stories that we put together a few times a year and compile sort of into one show that we call *The American Veteran*. So, over the next 3 to 4 days, I’m gonna be sharing the individual stories on our Facebook page so you can see them. If you’re interested, if, if you like those stories, go to [blogs.va.gov](https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/) [Link to VA’s official blog page]. Go to the, go to the, the categories portion; you’ll see *The American Veteran*. Then you can watch the full episodes there to see all of the stories, sort of put together, all in one package. Very cool product that we put together and some really inspiring stories from, from our Veterans that we get the opportunity to serve. This week’s episode is going to be with Sarah Verardo. Sarah is the CEO of the Independence Fund. Independence Fund is helping disabled Veterans get track chairs, so that way they can stay- continue to be on the move. They also help wounded, ill, and injured Veterans regain their independence through other means. But the track chair is definitely where they’re, where they’re well known. She is her husband’s caregiver along with being the CEO of the Independence Fund. She is her husband’s caregiver and I thought this would be a nice way to wrap up November, which is caregivers’ month. And it’s appropriate because, just recently, Sarah announced that the Independence Fund has a new program called Operation Resiliency. And it’s a program that’s teaming with us, the Department of Veterans’ Affairs, to host suicide prevention reunion retreats with the Veterans of high suicide rate and military units. So, very, very important work being done. Really honored to have that partnership between the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Independence Fund. And I know that this is going to be an effort that can only benefit the Veteran community and our society all together as we learn better ways to prevent suicide. Sarah is gonna talk to us about how her, how her and her husband met, they’re… how they grew their family, his injuries, how that impacted their family life, her experience at, her experiences as a caregiver, and then her efforts at the Independence Fund. Lots of great content here, know you’re gonna enjoy it.

[00:03:46] Music

# **[00:03:51] PSA:**

**Man 1:** I served in Vietnam.

**Man 2:** I served in World War II.

**Woman 1:** I served in Afghanistan.

**Man 1:** And VA serves us all.

**Man 2:** No matter when you served.

**Woman 1:** No matter if you saw combat or not.

**Man 1:** There are benefits for Veterans of every generation.

**Woman 1:** See what VA can do for you.

**Narrator:** To learn what benefits you may be eligible for, visit [www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov). That’s [www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov).

[00:04:19] Music

# **[00:04:23] INTERVIEW:**

**TL:** By the way, I should probably tell the audience we’re talking to Sarah Verardo, CEO of the Independence Fund. Caregiver to your husband, right?

**Sarah Verardo (SV):** Yes.

**TL:** We usually talk to Veterans about their, their, their decision to join the United States military. Were you, where was your husband, er yeah, where was your husband in his military career when you guys started dating?

**SV:** So, we actually met in high school –

**TL:** Okay. –

**SV:**  We were very dear friends. So, so we went through a lot of, you know, young life together. And we were there in high school, very small school in Rhode Island, during the events of September 11th. And like many warfighters of his generation, that was his call to join. –

**TL:** Sure. –

**SV:** So, he made a pact with two of our other dear friends to join the military after graduation.

**TL:** Yeah. Those, those are great ideas. Right? –

**SV:** [Laughter] –

**TL:** Pacts with your friends to go do something crazy like join the military. –

**SV:** Right. –

**TL:** Yeah. And so, how did you feel about the decision? Did you, I mean, were you, were you in a place of patriotism where you understood the call to duty with the pending war? Did you have more reservations about it? Where were you sitting on that?

**SV:** Michael has always been determined. And probably a little stubborn with what he wants to do. So, there’s probably no talking him out of joining and I was very, and always will be, very proud of his military service.

**TL:** Yeah. And what did he, what did he enlist as?

**SV:** 11 Bravo. –

**TL:** Okay. –

**SV:** Infantry. –

**TL:** Sure. –

**SV:** He was like if he was gonna go in, he was gonna go all in. –

**TL:** Right. –

**SV:** And he was gonna go with the best of the best. 82nd Airborne. –

**TL:** 82nd Airborne. –

**SV:** Yes. We’ve heard of them, right? [Laughing] –

**TL:** Yeah, I’ve heard of them. I’ve heard of them a time or two. Either, either on tattoos, or on hats, or anybody who was from 82nd will make sure you know that they were –

**SV:** They say how do you know someone was in the 82nd Airborne? –

**TL:** They’ll tell ya. –

**SV:** They tell ya. They’ll tell ya. Right. –

**TL:** Exactly. [Laughing]

**SV:** In terms of, we got, we actually got engaged during his medical recovery in Texas. –

**TL:** Okay. –

**SV:** And at that point, I was, I realized, as I had known, now the Army, the Army calls the shots. And so, we didn’t wanna plan this –

**TL:** Yeah. –

**SV:** Wedding until we knew he, he was completely out. So, we got married about 10 months after he left active duty. –

**TL:** Okay. What, what, how long, then, was he in before he got injured? How long?

**SV:** Three years.

**TL:** Three years.

**SV:**  Mhmm.

**TL:** How, when he was stationed did you, were you joining him in those moves, or were you staying at home –

**SV:** No. No, I was in Rhode Island.

**TL:** Gotcha. Okay. Where were you when you got the news that he was injured?

**SV:** I got the news, actually, in Rhode Island on Facebook from his mother. So –

**TL:** Oh wow. When you, you said you got engaged 10 months after he got out right? –

**SV:** We got married 10 months –

**TL:** Or you got, you got married 10 months out–

**SV:** Yes sir. –

**TL:**  You got engaged while he was in, while he was in recovery. –

**SV:** Mhmm.

**TL:** When you, when you got engaged to him, did you realize that you were gonna be his caregiver? Is that something you knew was gonna be a part of your life?

**SV:** I always say that Mike . . . The first time that I was going to see him post injury, he really wanted to make sure I understood the extent of his injuries. And I remember having this conversation, actually with his mom, and it was not a life he wanted for me. I think he knew before I did, how long this road was going to be. I didn’t realize it. And, but I would do it again, over and over and over again, of course.

**TL:** Sure. When, when did it dawn on you that, the better question was, when did you start becoming a, a full-time caregiver for him?

**SV:** The end of his med board process is when I feel like I had to take over a lot of the process. And leaving the Army for the final time- he was medically retired in January 2013- I would later sort of equate it to leaving the hospital with our newborn babies. Like, I could not believe that they were sending him home and that I was going to take care of him. –

**TL:** Sure. –

**SV:** It was daunting, it was scary. I didn’t know what to expect. And I remember the first time, like pushing him through an airport, pushing him in a wheelchair. I’m holding his prosthetic leg, sort of under my chin and carrying our bags. –

**TL:** [Laughing] –

**SV:** And –

**TL:** Sorry the visual is kind of funny. –

**SV:** It was crazy. –

**TL:** Yeah. –

**SV:** But then at the end, I was like, I’ve got this. I can do this. –

**TL:** Sure. What’s, what was one of the bigger challenges that you noticed immediately that maybe you weren’t anticipating in being a full-time caregiver?

**SV:** I’ll be frank, I did not realize that his war was over and mine was just beginning. –

**TL:** Mhmm.

**SV:** And in the beginning, we returned to Rhode Island, where we’re both from, after he recovered at Walter Reed and then in Texas at BAMC. And his war was over and mine was just beginning. And mine was fought on the home front. And, frankly, against the very institution that I thought was going to take care of him. We had a very difficult, painful transition to VA services. It took about 7 weeks for him to access very basic care. –

**TL:** Sure. –

**SV:** I had to go on YouTube and learn how to pack his wounds myself. He still had open wounds. –

**TL:** Oh wow. –

**SV:** I had the fire department carrying him in and out of the house. I was duct taping his prosthetic leg together. It was a, a very dark time for me. And I realize that I had to kind of relieve him of duty and this was my war on the home front now.

**TL:** Yeah. Did you, were you, you said you went back to Rhode Island but were you familiar with any other service members? Were there any other families that maybe were also going through a similar, did you a, did you have any comradery in that experience?

**SV:** Leaving Texas was difficult because there was a built-in support system there. You know, everyone has prosthetics, everyone has wheelchairs. It was very normal. And then, bringing him back to Rhode Island was a, just a stark change for us. You know, being, him being a military retiree in his 20’s was very, unlike the rest of the community, the retiree community –

**TL:** Sure. –

**SV:** Around us.

**TL:** How was, you know, how, how is your, your community in Rhode Island when it comes to accessibility? We know that a lot, a lot of neighborhoods and communities have a long way to go on that. I remember my, when I visited my, my, my wife now, but when, when we were dating she was living in Columbus, and we looked at her apartment complex, we looked around and realized, if someone visited you with a wheelchair, they would not be able to get to your apartment. –

**SV:** Right. –

**TL:** There is, there’s literally no way other than, like, getting a pulley system [Laughing] –

**SV:** Right. –

**TL:** That holds them to get them up there.

**SV:** We, we spent about maybe, 9, 10 months post-retirement in Rhode Island. We’re both life-long Rhode Islanders and love it. But we realized that the weather, the prosthetics, none of it was a good mix for us. And we also decided he loved North Carolina. He’d been stationed at Bragg and so, we decided to go, you know, back to Carolina for him. That’s where so much of his heart is, of course. And we settled in Charlotte where the Independence Fund has its national headquarters.

**TL:** Sure. We, we know that one of the more difficult things for any Veteran when they transition out of the military is finding, finding that renewed sense of purpose. What was that experience like for him from your perspective?

**SV:** It was very sad for me to watch this man without a purpose, without a mission. He missed his team, he missed the goal, and he so badly wanted to go back in the fight. And that was what was most difficult for him. You know, even waking up from his coma at Walter Reed and feeling like, the Taliban got one over him, like, they took him out of the fight. And that has actually stayed with him. You know we’re 8 years out and he’s back at Walter Reed right now recovering from surgery number 119. –

**TL:** Holy smokes. –

**SV:** Yeah.

**TL:** 119?

**SV:** Yes.

**TL:** Wow. That’s how many episodes of the podcast –

**SV:** [Laughing]

**TL:** I’ve put out. So, for every episode, he’s had at least one surgery.

**SV:** Yes.

**TL:** That’s nuts. Well, I mean –

**SV:** Yeah. –

**TL:** I don’t, I don’t know how much you’re willing to like, but –

**SV:** Sure. –

**TL:** Like what, what injuries are, is he dealing with?

**SV:** Sure. So, when, you know, when he was in, he deployed to southern Afghanistan in August 2009 to conduct combat operations. They had high casualty rates very quickly from improvised explosive devices. He was hit twice, April 2010. The first time was April 10th and he was riding as a gunner. They hit a roadside bomb. He was ejected out 30 feet. He was medically evacuated. Definitely banged up and had some injuries but he requested to be returned to his unit. And 14 days later, he was on his first foot patrol, back in action, another IED. This one he was on a foot patrol and just farmland, Taliban-controlled farmland. And the IED went off. And it blew off his left leg, much of his left arm. He’s burned over about 35% of his body and had severe facial injuries. So, he was expected to be dead on arrival. And I always tell him that the first hurdle he jumped was that he was not dead on arrival. –

**TL:** Yeah. –

**SV:** And he stayed in a coma throughout Germany and into Walter Reed. But since then, it’s been a constant battle of surgery, infection, surgery, infection. He is dependent for his activities of daily living. So, he does have, you know, we have in-home nursing. –

**TL:** Okay. –

**SV:** He has caregiving. And it’s been a very difficult situation with such, so much polytrauma for one person, of course.

**TL:** Sure. It’s interesting that you’ve mentioned that he, he looks at it as the Taliban got one on over him. That they, that they took him out of the fight. I’ve never, I’ve never, I’m sure that’s something that plenty of Veterans resonate with. But I, I’ve never actually heard it quite said like that. That they view it as, you know, one for the Taliban, zero for the, for the Veteran. I don’t know, I don’t –

**SV:** I mean, we try to reverse that. –

**TL:** Okay. –

**SV:** And that’s really important to me because you know, when, when the days are tough, and it feels like he can’t push anymore. I mean, we say, we don’t want to give them –

**TL:** Yeah. –

**SV:** His life on a silver platter. I don’t want that for my children. –

**TL:** Right. –

**SV:** And, you know, feeling like you’re still fighting that every day, is actually a push forward for him. –

**TL:** Sure. –

**SV:** And so I tell him, you know, every time he comes out of anesthesia, every time he has difficulty, I always say it’s another chance to show America’s enemies they can’t take Mike Verardo out. –

**TL:** Yeah. –

**SV:** He likes that. –

**TL:** I like that. [Laughing] –

**SV:** Yeah. –

**TL:** [Laughing] Take that! –

**SV:** Yeah. Yeah. –

**TL:** You, so, something’s that unique about your family is you have 3 kids. –

**SV:** Mhmm. –

**TL:** All of them conceived post-injury. –

**SV:** Mhmm. –

**TL:** Which I think is unique for a lot of military and Veteran families that are in this situation. Was it a tough decision to decide to have kids post injury? Just based . . . just on, you know, recovering from an injury, recovering from any, any mental health issues. You know, how busy your life must be dealing with that. How was it coming to that, that decision to have kid number one?

**SV:** Well, I actually look at our client base at the Independence Fund and the history of the Independence Fund and I say these track chairs, which are our original hallmark program. A lot of the Veterans that we assisted with that, due to the, you know, their occupation in the military, were usually Infantry or other frontline positions and they had these catastrophic injuries. Young, enlisted, single men. So, we give them a track chair. They go on, they get married. We bring their wife on a caregiver retreat. And then, you know, they have a couple of kids. And so, we provide adaptive sports to get them outside, riding bikes with the kids. And, you know, they’re having some problems with VA. So, our advocacy program steps in. And now we’re launching a family program because a lot of our clients that did have these catastrophic wartime injuries, although we are very proudly open to all eras. But, when we look at our post-9-11 catastrophically war wounded, many of our clients actually started their families post-injury. –

**TL:** That’s interesting.

**SV:** And so, for us, having children has always been such a blessing. And I think our little girls have restored so much of what the terrorists took from him and just given him hope, a purpose, and a team again.

**TL:** Very cool. How, how’s it been, how, how old’s your oldest?

**SV:** We have three little girls. –

**TL:** Okay. –

**SV:** One, two and four. –

**TL:** Oh, okay. –

**SV:** Yes. –

**TL:** So, so still very, still quite young, then?

**SV:** Yes.

**TL:** Okay. Has the four-year-old, what grasp does she have, do you believe, on, on her father’s situation?

**SV:** My children never knew anything was wrong or different about their dad –

**TL:** Yeah. –

**SV:** Until other people started to tell them. –

**TL:** Right. –

**SV:** And that was a very painful process. We were at preschool when our oldest was three and someone said to her, you know, Grace’s dad doesn’t have a leg. He’s weird and gross. –

**TL:** Mmmm

**SV:** And she was so upset because, you know, she thinks her daddy’s handsome and that he’s a hero –

**TL:** Yeah. –

**SV:** And we’re so proud of his military service. And, you know, the following evening, I was putting her to bed, and she told me again that this little girl said that her daddy was gross. And I knew how bothered she was by that. And it, and it made me realize, I have been dealing with this for years, of course. –

**TL:** Right. –

**SV:** People have questions, people stare. But my children needed really tactical tools to help other people understand their dad and other Veterans’ wartime injuries. You know, my husband served with the best of the best and many of the men he served with are also amputees, they’re wheelchair bound. And so, for our children, all the uncles, you know, are missing legs. And it’s, it’s very normal for them. So, I did write a children’s book called ‘Hero at Home’ –

**TL:** Yes! –

**SV:** Which, which helps in really easy to explain this for preschool to elementary school crowd, explain wartime injuries, the visible and invisible injuries.

**TL:** Yeah, so, was, was your experience with your own children the inspiration behind writing this book?

**SV:** Absolutely. I mean, I realized that night, I needed to help other children understand, you know, why some dads may have robot legs. And why they look different. And, and also that we have told our children since then that people, their bodies may change but they have the same heart still. –

**TL:** Yeah. –

**SV:** And that was a really important message I wanted to pass on that Veterans who look different, anyone who looks different from us, they’re not scary. And, you know, celeb . . . celebrating difference and diversity, of course.

**TL:** Have you gotten an opportunity to hear any of the feedback or impact of the, the, the books had on other families?

**SV:** I’ve heard from teachers across the country, moms, dads, so many people who just say, “Thank you for giving me these tools to celebrate military service.” –

**TL:** Yeah. –

**SV:** And we try to teach children and, and I’ve heard this feedback across the country that, rather than looking at a Veteran who has a prosthetic leg and telling the children don’t stare. You know, we are urging people to say, say, “Hello.” Ask them about their service. Thank them for their service. –

**TL:** Yeah. –

**SV:** And let’s really celebrate this wonderful country that is free because of America’s heroes. –

**TL:** Sure. So, let’s, let’s transition into your work at the Independence Fund. For those that are unfamiliar, give a little, just a brief backstory on the conception of, of the Independence Fund and, and your involvement in it.

**SV:** The Independence Fund was founded in 2007 with a great spirit of providing true independence back to those who sacrificed theirs for us. And I became involved not long after my husband realized that he would benefit greatly from a track wheelchair. I ran development for many years at the Independence Fund and took over about a year and a half ago or so. We have an incredible team, mostly Veterans and caregivers. We really love to empower military families. And our programs are tangible. We’re giving back direct support. We’ve awarded more than $60 million dollars in direct support, through our track wheelchairs, adaptive sports, caregiver retreats. We’ve served over 500 caregivers. We’ve helped more than 1500 Veterans with adaptive sports and we’ve provided more than 2300 track wheelchairs.

**TL:** Yeah. I really liked the, you touched on it briefly earlier, but almost the the sort of the flow through one’s life and how you have, you have stuff set up to, to aid that Veteran and that family at each point. The mobility’s first thing, get the Veteran back on the move, then, you know, adaptive sports. Keep them active once they’ve, once they have people to be active with and they’re used to that environment again. The caregiver support, then the advocate, then the advocacy that sort of fills in the gaps along the way. Has that always been sorta, has those four priorities sort of been there from, from the beginning or, or where did this begin and how did it develop?

**SV:** The Independence Fund was definitely developed around the track chair initiative. –

**TL:** Okay. –

**SV:** And we’ve been able to expand our programs and support. But I tell my team, I charge them with this. I want us to be like a disaster relief organization. We need to be fluid. We need to keep up with the needs of these families. And our support should be immediate, it should be tangible. And we should fulfill these unmet needs for our catastrophically wounded, ill, and injured.

**TL:** What is a positive impact you’ve seen through these initiatives that have sort of a unique, unique impact that maybe wasn’t the intent but definitely, definitely another win, another mark in the win column?

**SV:** The Independence Fund has so many wins that I could –

**TL:** Yeah. –

**SV:** Could sit here all day and tell you that –

**TL:** Sure. –

**SV:** because we’ve, we’ve provided this tangible support to families. But, –

**TL:** Yeah. –

**SV:** Be it our advocacy program people who are, you know, trying to access benefits that they are due, due to infertility that’s service-connected Being able to –

**TL:** Sure. –

**SV:** Successfully get them through that process and then celebrate the news of a growing family. I mean, that’s incredible. Veterans who are bed-bound, who love going outside and getting outside in their track chair. And from hearing from caregivers who just say that we gave them the tools to carry on. We know that secondary PTS and stress in caregivers is such a problem. I mean, these people are really carrying the torch on the home front. –

**TL:** Yeah. –

**SV:** And being able to be with them, our commitment is lifelong. We want to be with these families every step of the way.

**TL:** Sure. What, what challenges did, do you guys have in delivering these, these benefits and these resources to Veterans? What are some either hurdles that you, that you’ve had along the way or just sort of routine stuff that, like, becomes sticking points?

**SV:** We have a, we have a fabulous team and they, they execute the mission –

**TL:** I mean, talk up, talk up your team, then. –

**SV:** Yeah. I mean we, everyone on our team is there because, like, they eat, live, breathe, and sleep the mission. And –

**TL:** Yeah. –

**SV:** We feel that there is no population more deserving than those that, you know, put on their country’s uniform and then were severely injured defending it.

**TL:** Yeah. What is a, what is a experience you had before joining the Independence Fund that you had with your husband that is contributing to your success with Independence Fund? If that question makes sense.

**SV:** I mean, it makes sense, but Independence Fund is so tightly woven into our story, pretty much, from the beginning. –

**TL:** Okay.

**SV:** The track chair. When my husband got the track chair, I mean, it was a game changer. –

**TL:** Sure. –

**SV:** And it allowed him these measures of independence that he thought were gone forever. Just going in the backyard, playing with our dogs. We’ve got three dogs. –

**TL:** Nice. –

**SV:** And even participating in like, you know, yard work. Things that you don’t think you’ll be able to do anymore. I have seen firsthand how impactful the track chair is on the entire family. Not only the disabled Veteran, but the entire family.

**TL:** Yeah. I mean, so how is it positively impacted you as a member of that family when your husband got access to this track chair?

**SV:** Well, he loves to go outside. He loves to, you know, hunt, fish, shoot. All of those things he was able to do from his track chair. He’s been on deer hunts, goes outside with his friends, and also, just playing with our children outside. Being able to keep –

**TL:** Yeah. –

**SV:** up with them was something that worried him. And outside, you know, I feel very comfortable. Like they love, they fight over riding in his lap. –

**TL:** [Laughter] –

**SV:** So, I, we need a bigger track chair. I mean we really do because like three little girls trying to cram, you know, into one track chair with him. –

**TL:** Yeah. –

**SV:** But we might need like a side cart or something, I’m sure. –

**TL:** How fast do those things go?

**SV:** ‘Bout 5 miles an hour.

**TL:** 5 miles an hour? –

**SV:** Yeah. So, but they’re mighty. I mean, they go through anything.

**TL:** Sure. I mean, I mean how do, do they, do they travel well? Are they, yeah?

**SV:** We do. We, we at the Independence Fund, we make sure that we provide a trailer –

**TL:** Okay.

**SV:** To each Veteran so that the chair is not sitting in their garage. Like we, we want them to be a part of their community, be engaged. We have a fantastic program team who matches with other resources in the community, other nonprofits in community so that, if we’re getting someone in Montana a track chair, let’s find you somewhere that you can go fish –

**TL:** Yeah. –

**SV:** From it, so.

**TL:** I mean, so like are Veterans using track chairs, are they also traveling with a normal wheelchair to, like, more easily access other buildings and stuff? –

**SV:** Yes. –

**TL:** Like, how does the logistics on that work? –

**SV:** Yes. The track chair is all-terrain. I mean –

**TL:** Yeah. –

**SV:** Sn . . . Snow, sand, water, I mean you name it, it can go through. And we’ve tested it all trust me. [Laughing] –

**TL:** Yeah. –

**SV:** We know. But in terms of actual like day-to-day use, they, they do. A lot of them use it daily for independence, get outside, be with their family. But it’s not really conducive to, like, being folded up and put in your car. I mean –

**TL:** Sure. –

**SV:** I think it’s like 450 pounds. –

**TL:** Holy Smokes. –

**SV:** So [Laughing], yeah.

**TL:** There’s a really great picture that we shared on our Instagram account, probably about a year or two ago. The Independence Fund might have had hand a hand in this, I don’t know. A Veteran had gotten a track chair and was actually walking on the beach with his ki . . . with his son. And it was like this back, back shot of them walking down the beach and holding hands. It was like this really powerful moment and it is pretty incredible that we’ve reached the point in technology that we can get disabled Veterans and disabled people on the beach. Like sand is such a weird terrain to try to, to maneuver over. And here they are just strolling down the, down the beach. It’s amazing.

**SV:** We, last year, my family and I went to Florida. And I just didn’t plan it properly. Didn’t bring a track chair with us. And so, we’re on the beach and my girls, of course, like they want dad to build a sand castle. They want him to go in the water. And we used this hotel beach wheelchair that they had. And my husband is looking at it and he’s like, “It’s not sturdy, it’s not sturdy.” And, you know, I was like, “You’ll be fine, you’ll be fine.” –

**TL:** Yeah. –

**SV:** So, he gets in it. And we bring him in the water and the chair flips over. –

**TL:** Oh my goodness.

**SV:** And he gets tangled. Like, his swimsuit gets tangled in it. And all these people are rushing to help him. And we end up having to cut his swimsuit to untangle him from the chair. And I realize, gosh with the track chair, which we had about 12 hours later. –

**TL:** Yeah. –

**SV:** We, we rented one. You know, we realized that all of those hurdles to independence, to family time, are gone with the track chair. I mean these things, they’re beast. They really work.

**TL:** Yeah. Tell us about the advocacy part of what you do. There’s a lot of VA staff listening. There’s a lot of people involved in stuff like that. Any challenges that Veterans you see are having routinely with VA? I know it’d be valuable to them to understand what challenges are, are there.

**SV:** Our client base, because they are catastrophically wounded, ill and injured, typically have interagency issues. Meaning that VA is not the only government agency that they interface from. –

**TL:** Sure. –

**SV:** A lot of them have Tricare, Social Security, which brings in, of course, a lot of other agencies. –

**TL:** Yeah. –

**SV:** What we do that sets us apart is, rather than do a lot of these ‘rank and file’ benefit claims, which certainly we have great partnerships that we refer those out to, but we really deal with the healthcare side of things. So, we hear from a Veteran who says, “I’m a double amputee. Not sure why, maybe there’s a miscommunication, but VA’s telling me I don’t qualify for a power wheelchair.” And we know leadership at VA. We know that the people at VA really do have a heart for those who have served our country. And sometimes it’s as simple as a communication issue, sometimes it’s a little bit more complicated about a policy that needs to be changed. And whatever that is, through our advocacy on Capitol Hill and really enacting and reforming legislation. And then also, just direct, directly interfacing with VA for our clients, we’re able to have a high success rate of ensuring that the medical needs are met for our catastrophically disabled Veterans. And that the burden is lightened for their family.

**TL:** Sure. Tell me about your caregiver retreats and what, what caregivers and families are gleaning from, from that experience.

**SV:** Our caregiver retreats are so important because we know this. Caring for a disabled Veterans is a 24/7 role. There’s no respite and oftentimes, you become- and I know this personally- you become sometimes mom, dad, a nurse, a doctor, the case manager, the keeper of all of the things. –

**TL:** Yeah. –

**SV:** And that wears on a person. And so being able to bring these caregivers together and offer them peer support, some respite, pampering, and also really tactical tools that they are taking home with them. This is how to alleviate stress. This is what I can do when I feel that I’ve reached my max. Here are resources in the community. We provide aftercare so that when they leave our retreat it’s not just that they’ve been relaxed, and they can go home, but we are staying with them. We’re tracking the families and providing unmet needs be it, you know, gym memberships, or childcare, or food delivery. We are making sure that they feel our support really wrapped around them. And, and with them for the long term. –

**TL:** Yeah. –

**SV:** Our family program is actually going to launch in about 10 days. –

**TL:** Oh, very cool. –

**SV:** Yes, which we are so thrilled about. So, our first family retreat will take place in Disney World. –

**TL:** Oh good. –

**SV:** And we’re bringing 7 catastrophically wounded Veterans, post-9-11 Veterans for this retreat, all who had either infants when they were injured or had their children post-injury. –

**TL:** Okay. –

**SV:** So, we have a lot of young children with an emphasis on art therapy for those kids. –

**TL:** Yeah. –

**SV:** And doing things like, “What color is today?” So that the kids can really talk about some of the challenges. You know, my children will sometimes say that the noises Mike makes when he moves can scare ‘em. They think he’s in pain.

**TL:** Hmmm.

**SV:** I mean, obviously, sometimes there’s a little moaning and groaning. –

**TL:** Sure. –

**SV:** And so, we’ve taught them, “Okay, that’s dad’s moving voice.” –

**TL:** Yeah. –

**SV:** And really being able to help these families shape a really healthy household for all of them.

**TL:** Yeah. One thing that I was talking to Liz Rotenberry [Pronounced Row-ten-berry]. I almost went with Rotenber [Pronounced Rod-den-berry] . . . I was like nope that was Roden . . . we had a big conversation about how it’s not Rotenberry. [Pronounced Rod-den-berry] –

**SV:** Yeah, yeah. –

**TL:** It’s Rotenberry [Pronounced Row-ten-berry]. Is caregivers are, like, you know, so, wives, girlfriends, mothers, whoever it may be, full-time caregivers who also have a relationship as an immediate family member. The challenges that they have of being a caregiver and then separately be a wife and to try to keep that as separated as much as possible so that way, you know, their spouse responds to them appropriately based on which role they’re taking in that moment. What sort of guidance are you gonna give family members on, on that challenge?

**SV:** Well, for us, I look at a lot of my husband’s medical situation and I’ve had to provide what is, you know, unofficial nursing care a lot of the time like packing bandages and wounds and, and checking him in those ways. And it’s very hard to maintain how are you husband and wife versus just caregiver and care recipient. –

**TL:** Yeah. –

**SV:** And we work hard to have strong boundaries in place around that. For our physically injured, like we do, and our clients do, utilize a lot of nursing care, either at home or through VA. And we’ve seen fabulous partnerships between VA and the community in making sure our catastrophically disabled does have that support at home so it’s not all falling on the caregiver. So, it definitely, for our client base, refer them to work with VA so that you’re not carrying the burden alone because actually, VA has incredible resources that they do want to match in the home. And also, communicating with the Veteran. –

**TL:** Sure. –

**SV:** And, and that’s been just a huge one of keeping the communication lines open, boundaries on, you know, how, how you’re dealing in that moment. Are you being the caregiver and saying this is what’s medically necessary or are you husband and wife and having some time off from the injury? So, so that’s been a game-changer for us, personally. There was a time where I felt like if we would go out to dinner, for example, I would make the dinner reservation, give my husband his shower, get him dressed for dinner, and push him there in the wheelchair. And it’s very hard to then feel like, “Okay, let’s flip the switch and now I’m your wife sitting across from you.” And that’s why being able to, maybe, rely on friends or say to my husband, through other programs he utilizes, like, “Why don’t you and your life coach take on making a dinner reservation?” –

**TL:** Yeah. –

**SV:** And, and that takes it off of me. So, really being able to rely on your community. I think there’s no better advice for a caregiver than, you know, accept help and ask for help. And then let people help you because they want to.

**TL:** Sure. Tell me about a v . . . tell me about a, another Veteran-focused organization that you're familiar with that has you excited right now.

**SV:** We are very proud to partner with both PsychArmor and Elizabeth Dole Foundation. –

**TL:** Sure. –

**SV:** I think they’re incredible. I’m always proud to be the Elizabeth Dole fellow. I’m an alumni fellow from what feels like a hundred years ago. But [Laughing] it wasn’t really that long ago. And great support. I love that EDF has really identified, like, what is a caregiver. The Independence Fund is proud to be in the fight with them. We work extremely closely with them on an ongoing basis. And, also, with PsychArmor, with their courses. We are going to be pushing out some really incredible courses that deal with families like mine. And how the community can rally around them, how educators can understand them. And talking to your children about these injuries.

**TL:** Sure. So, tell us is there any, is there any other part of your experience as a caregiver or any aspect of the, the Independence Fund that you wanna make sure gets mentioned that we haven’t brought up yet today?

**SV:** It is very important for me, for Veterans and VA providers to realize that we know there are incredible people at VA. We actually hosted an inaugural healthcare hero award a couple of weeks ago, that we will do annually, that recognizes one outstanding VA medical provider for going above and beyond the call of duty for our nation’s wounded, ill, and injured. And I was so proud to present that inaugural award to Dr. Thomas Rapisardo. He’s out of the Salisbury North Carolina VA. –

**TL:** Sure. –

**SV:** And I know firsthand how incredible he is because he’s cared for my husband for the past 5 years. –

**TL:** Yeah. –

**SV:** And I also look at someone like Dr. Valerie Moore. She is also out of the Salisbury VA. She’s been my husband surgeon for 5 years. And, you know, she has taken time off and come with us to civilian appointments. She drove from North Carolina to Walter Reed for this most recent surgery, just to be there for support. So, I really believe VA and the families and other nonprofit organizations working together are what is going to equal success for these families for the long haul.

**TL:** Sure. Salisbury, I believe, was one of the medical cen . . . one of the facilities that took in patients that had to be evacuated from Hampton prior to Hurricane Florence. And that entire healthcare system down there in North Carolina did a fantastic job accommodating for such things. And it was about as seamless as VA could have hoped. So, yeah, that, a lot, a lot of praise to go all around in that, that area. –

**SV:** Absolutely. All of the directors of North Carolina VA facilities are Veterans themself. –

**TL:** Yeah. –

**SV:** And I’ve, I’ve sat with them and met with them. We’ve shared stories and I think that they get it. And that is so important. Like they, they’ve of course want to do right for their fellow Veterans.

**TL:** Yeah. Absolutely. Sarah, thank you so much for your time talking to me today. I, I –

**SV:** Thanks for having me. –

**TL:** Of course. It’s a, it’s been a –

**SV:** And for your service. –

**TL:** Oh! –

**SV:** I mean, we’re so grateful that you turned it into something so good for so many others.

**TL:** Yeah. Well, I appreciate that. Trust me. I got way more out of the military than it got out of me. –

**SV:** [Laughter]

**TL:** I, I milked that relationship, you know. I gave them a few years of my life and they gave me a free education. I think we’re gonna call it, call it even there. But for anybody who is, who’s, who has heard this and is interested. They wanna learn a little bit more. Maybe they have a Veteran that could benefit from a track chair, whatever it may be. What do they need to know about the Independence Fund?

**SV:** Call us 888-851-7996 or look us up at [independencefund.org](http://www.independencefund.org/) [Link to the Independence Fund website].

**TL:** Wonderful. Thanks, Sarah.

**SV:** Thank you.

[00:36:20] Music

# **[00:36:25] PSA**

**Man:** My grandfather served in World War II. Spending time with him were the best memories of my life. I became a physician at VA because of my grandfather so I can help others like him. I can’t imagine working with better doctors or a more dedicated staff. I’m fulfilling my life’s mission with the help of my team and thanks to these Veterans. I’m proud to be a doctor at VA and proud to honor my grandfather every day. Search VA careers to find out more.

[00:36:57] Music

# **[00:37:02] CLOSING MONOLOGUE**

**TL:** Thank you so much for Sarah for joining me. She was nice enough to come by VA central office, sit down, and talk about these matters that a, that are important. Not only to her, but to caregivers and Veterans that receive these benefits from the Independence Fund. And, and looking forward to our partnership with them as a, as we move to be better at preventing suicide. You can find the Independence Fund at [independencefund.org](http://www.independencefund.org/) [Link to the Independence Fund’s website] for information on their efforts. You can also follow them on Twitter @IndyFund [Link to Independence Fund’s Twitter page: <https://twitter.com/indyfund?lang=en>]. I-N-D-Y-Fund.

This week’s Medal of Honor citation reading is for William Creelman. William Creelman. Service is, service is United States Navy. Rank of Landsman. Division was the U.S.S. Maine. Year of honor, 1897. Citation reads, “Attached to the U.S.S. *Maine*, 6 February 1897. Distinguishing himself, Creelman showed extraordinary heroism in the line of his profession during an attempt to save life at sea.” We honor his service. That wraps up Episode 122. My goodness, 122 of *Borne the Battle*. I do appreciate everybody taking the time to listen. If you enjoy the episode, please share it on the social media of your choice using #BornetheBattle. Leave us a rating and review in your podcatcher of choice, whether it be iTunes, Stitcher Radio, Spotify, Google Play, wherever, whatever it is that you listen to podcasts. I do appreciate that rating and review. Follow us on Twitter and Instagram @DeptVetAffairs [Link to VA’s Twitter page: <https://twitter.com/DeptVetAffairs?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor> and link to VA’s Instagram page: <https://www.instagram.com/deptvetaffairs/?hl=en>]. I’ve already told you where you can find us on Facebook: [facebook.com/VeteransAffairs](https://www.facebook.com/VeteransAffairs) [Link to VA’s Facebook page]. And if you have any feedback on the show, please email us at [newmedia@va.gov](mailto:newmedia@va.gov). I’m Timothy Lawson, signing off.

[00:39:05] Music out