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Next 18 Founder Matt McDonell Named 2022 WebMD Health Hero
Awards Spotlight Everyday Heroes Confronting Nation's Mental Health Challenges

MILWAUKEE, Wis. – Next 18, a nonprofit program that hosts golf camps for military vets and first responders, today announced its founder and executive director Matt McDonell was named a [2022 WebMD Health Heroes](#). This year, the annual award honors six everyday heroes who are confronting the nation's mental health challenges with ingenuity, compassion and bravery.

After returning home from Afghanistan in 2015, McDonell, an Army veteran, was taking a cocktail of prescription drugs to help him sleep and relieve his emotional and physical pain from tinnitus, TMJ, post-concussive migraines, and much more. For nearly 7 years, the repressed memories of war kept flooding back.

While at his lowest, McDonell received an email from Semper Fi & America's Fund, an organization that supports combat veterans, inviting him to a golf camp in Denver. He went to one golf camp, then another, and realized how many mental health practices such as mindfulness were intrinsic to the game – from making a choice of what club to use, to deciding how to approach a shot.

That spark of an idea grew into [Next 18](#), a nonprofit program that hosts golf camps for military vets and first responders. The participants receive instruction from local pros, as well as guidance in self-care practices such as breathwork, mindfulness, journaling, and yoga.

“While Veterans have been calling for help for decades regarding mental health, I am hopeful that our camps will help address the mental health needs and provide a more holistic approach to life,” said Matt McDonell, Next 18 Executive Director and founder. “There are many benefits to participating and many of the lessons being shared have made a substantial difference in my own life and of those around me. I want to help bridge the gap between civilians and Veterans/first responders so they can be there for each other. There is strength in seeking help.”

During their camp experiences, participants say they can discuss things they may not have spoken to others about before and begin to heal the trauma that many have encountered in battle and elsewhere.

Next 18 has hosted six camps with 63 alumni so far, and they plan to have eight more camps next year. McDonell, who is also working on getting his master's degree in social work, wants to grow to 15 to 20 camps a year and expand into warmer parts of the country for the winter months.

This year's Awards spotlight inspiring individuals, including McDonell, who are taking on the challenge of confronting mental health, sharing their personal struggles and vulnerabilities, shining a light on issues



that have long been stigmatized and making a difference.

Their work arrives at a moment of urgency. Mental health disorders were already on the rise, but the impact of the pandemic, the burnout of health care professionals, and the isolation and loneliness of lockdowns exacerbated the problem.

Currently, more than 52 million Americans are living with mental illness, and an estimated 12 million have had suicidal thoughts. Nearly 5 million are not able to obtain mental health care, are unable to afford it, feel uncomfortable opening up in a traditional therapeutic setting, or risk career and personal stigma if they seek help.

While it's estimated that 11 million Americans suffer from PTSD or trauma, there are a staggering 22 military veterans who die by suicide every day. Both firefighters and police officers are more likely to die by suicide than in the line of duty.

When you are in the military or a first responder, you may be exposed to life-changing events such as combat or distressing situations. These types of events can lead to PTSD. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, between 11-20% of veterans who served in Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom have PTSD in a given year. In addition, about 12% of Gulf War veterans have PTSD in a given year while 30% of Vietnam War veterans have had PTSD in their lifetime. It is also estimated that 18-24% of dispatchers and 35% of police officers suffer from PTSD, according to the National Alliance on Mental Health.

More information on the 2022 WebMD Health Heroes is available here:

<https://www.webmd.com/healthheroes/default.htm>



ABOUT

Matt McDonnell, Next 18 Founder and Executive Director, served in the U.S. Army as an Airborne Infantryman with the 173rd Airborne Brigade stationed in Germany. Matt deployed to Afghanistan in a combat role from 2012 -2013. Since medically retiring from the military in 2015, Matt owned and operated a successful lawn and snow removal company staffed by Veterans, received his MBA from Cardinal Stritch University, and is currently and is currently studying to become a Licensed Clinical Social Worker at

Concordia University. An avid golfer and former varsity golf captain at Germantown High School, Matt lives in Fox Point with his German Shepherd service dog, Loki. [Learn more about Next 18 here.](#)

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