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Challenge Aspen helping Iraq War veterans

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After an explosion hit his Humvee in Iraq in 2005, Eric Edmundson suffered a heart attack, a brain injury and a ruptured spleen. Almost three years later, he has relearned how to eat and can walk with assistance. And last week, with his parents and wife by his side, Edmundson moved from his wheelchair into the front of a boat to go whitewater rafting for the first time.

Edmundson, 28, was one of four veterans of the Iraq War who pushed past disabilities such as blindness, amputation and traumatic brain injuries to participate in Challenge Aspen's Iraqi Mountain Adventure last week.

The severity of the soldiers' injuries added a new dynamic — and new challenges — to a growing veteran program at Challenge Aspen, an organization that creates adventure programs for people with disabilities. Started in 2005 with two week-long programs for veterans, Challenge Aspen is offering eight programs this year because of increased demand.

Last week's program was the first to cater exclusively to soldiers and families with severe disabilities from the Iraq conflict. The four men are the most severely injured soldiers returning from Iraq that Challenge Aspen has worked with to date, said Sarah Williams Volf, director of programs.

There were two men in wheelchairs, one with an above-the-knee amputation and several with cognitive disabilities. And there were their wives and parents, who came along to help care for the soldiers during the Sunday-through-Friday program. It was the first time most of the families had traveled together for recreation since the soldiers' injuries, Volf said.

The addition of larger family groups changed the focus of the veteran program, which usually sees soldiers with a single family member or individually, Volf said.

"The one thing that stood out to me this week was the importance of family, and the importance of including the family members in the activities," she said. "It's great to have them there not only to witness the joy of their family member but to have fun together and really just be a family."

Eric Edmundson participated in Iraqi Mountain Adventure with his wife, Stephanie, and his parents, Ed and Beth. The family was apprehensive at first about Eric participating in the activities because of his injuries, but the Challenge Aspen team put them at ease quickly, Ed Edmundson said.

Volf said she normally creates the agenda for the week before she chooses the soldiers who will attend, but this time she did it differently so she could base the itinerary around their needs. She said she spent time e-mailing with the families to make sure she catered the program to the specific disabilities of each soldier.

Watching Eric go rafting, horseback riding, fly fishing and swimming in the Hot Springs pool in Glenwood Springs made the Edmundsons more confident about his abilities, Ed Edmundson said.

“It’s made us feel so much more comfortable, and Eric has showed us a little bit more in an extreme activity about what he’s able to do,” Ed Edmundson said. “And I believe Eric feels a lot more confident about what he’s able to do.”

Since his injury, the Edmundson family lives together with Eric and Stephanie’s 3-year-old daughter, Gracie, in North Carolina.

“You know it could happen, but when it does your heart just goes immediately to, ‘What does he need, how is he, what do we need to do to take care of him?’” Beth Edmundson said. “I think as a family we all at the very beginning just knew we were going to do whatever we needed to do to help Eric get better.”

Being with other families of wounded soldiers created a sense of camaraderie, Beth said.

One such family was the Briests. Corey Briest, 27, was injured Dec. 4, 2005, while patrolling a new route in Iraq. The first car in the patrol passed safely, but the second was hit by a bomb. Briest, a paramedic, was in the third car but got out to help the others. That was when an improvised explosive device went off, killing three soldiers and injuring Briest.

As his wife, Jenny, recounted the story of his injury before fly fishing, Corey Briest softly said the names of the soldiers who died that day. Jenny stopped to look at him.

“They’re going to help you catch some fish later, right?” she asked.

Briest’s brain is swollen and he sees only in rare second-long glimpses. Jenny, 26, helps him to maneuver around chairs and tables and takes care of him in South Dakota, where they live with their two children and a dog.

“When we’re at home, we try to stay active,” Jenny Briest said. “All these military guys, they don’t like to sit. It makes them crazy.”

Jenny heard about Challenge Aspen from another injured soldier. Corey loved to ride horses before his injury, so she knew it would be a good experience for him. The activities have been difficult, she said, but “Corey’s the type of guy who is up for the challenge.”

“The only thing I don’t have is my sight,” Corey said. “That’s not going to stop me.”

The program also offered a nice vacation from therapy and frustrations at home, Jenny said. “These guys go through therapy and it’s not fun. It’s work. And here, it’s therapeutic, and it’s work, but they’re having fun. Seeing these guys smile makes it all worth it.”

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