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Obstacles into Opportunities

*UW-Madison graduate and Team Rubicon founder
Jake Wood sees opportunity in disaster relief*

When former Badger football player Jake Wood returned from serving two tours with the Marines in Iraq and Afghanistan, he saw many of his fellow military veterans having a hard time adjusting to civilian life.

“We’re seeing a lot of veterans in my generation pursuing self-destructive habits,” Wood said.

Young veterans are dealing with the mental and physical wounds from serving in the Middle East and at the same time trying to build a new life in the U.S. Some don’t make it. Jake had a close friend who took his own life. Many others turned to drugs and alcohol.

The solution to helping some of these veterans can be found in disaster relief. When a massive earthquake hit Haiti in early 2010, Wood knew he could help. “I thought, ‘What if I could take all of the combat and first-aid skills I learned in Afghanistan and Iraq and take them to Haiti?’”

Wood contacted friends he had served with and within 96 hours, a team of nine veterans was in Haiti. In the earthquake-ravaged country, they found chaos. Massive amounts of supplies were stuck at the airport in Port Au Prince and countless people needed medical attention. Jake’s team got to work. “We were using the skills we’d learned over the previous four years to help people.”

And with that, Team Rubicon was born. Soon their work got the attention of the media and financial support started coming in from around the world.

Since Team Rubicon’s work in Haiti, the organization’s scope and membership has vastly increased. Team Rubicon has helped with natural disasters in Pakistan, South Sudan, and Burma. And when a massive tornado hit Joplin, Missouri, Team Rubicon began its work in the U.S.

Looking back on his friend Clay, who took his own life after returning from the Middle East, Wood said his friend didn’t take his own life because of what happened in Iraq, instead, Wood said, his friend was lost.

“He had lost his mission in life,” Wood said. “After Clay’s death we realized that Team Rubicon can provide opportunities to veterans for them to continue serving. Through Team Rubicon, we found we can

have an incredible impact on military veterans.”

Team Rubicon provides military veterans with a mission, training, health, and community. Today the organization continues this work, recently helping with recovery efforts in Alabama after a series of tornados tore through the state.

The lesson in all of it, Wood says, is that there are always ways to turn obstacles into opportunities.

“It’s easy for people to see obstacles but I think we need to turn obstacles into opportunities,” Wood said. “There’s only so much you can do about the path that lies in front of you. The only thing you can control is what you’re going to do about it.” ■

