



Creating Employment
Opportunities
For People With
Significant Disabilities

NATIONAL OFFICE

“Please Lord, Let Me Provide for my Family”

June 4, 2012

I'm Neil Colomac. And I'm a wounded veteran
from Operation Enduring Freedom.

I'm here to talk to you about how my injuries
made it hard for me to get a job.

But with the help of a special regulation,

I was able to get back into the work force.

My hope is that by sharing my story today,

I can help other veterans and other people with disabilities.

I was deployed to Afghanistan

with the 864th Engineer Battalion of the US Army in 2006.

It was around September second, 2007

when my unit was in the Paktika region of Afghanistan.

This is a mountainous area known for periodic attacks
on Coalition soldiers and bases.

A previous convoy had mistakenly dropped a conex,
which is a metal container, with sensitive equipment inside.

Our mission was to provide security

8401 Old Courthouse Road, Vienna, VA 22182

PHONE:571.226.4660FAX:703.560.6512EMAIL:info@nish.org



Gregory D. Bender
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for the unit dispatched to recover it.

We were in a Humvee and there were 5 of us.

My job was turret gunner, so I was like a prairie dog,

sticking my head out of the top

with my 50 Caliber machine gun pointed out.

I was looking around for any signs of danger.

We were returning to base after another truck had picked up the conex

when I noticed that there was something *not right* about this valley.

The truck in front of us was kicking up a lot of dust,

so it was hard to see.

All of a sudden,

there was an explosion about 15 feet behind our Humvee.

I could feel the shockwave through my entire body.

Since my head was exposed,

I got hit in the face with shrapnel and fractured a joint in my jaw.

We found a safe place to pull over

and stopped the convoy to assess the damage.

I held my jaw with one hand

while I filled in the incident report with the other.

We returned safely to base and I went to the aid station.

I received stitches and antibiotics and went back to my unit.

About 3 weeks later, on September 21, we had another incident. We were on a mission to retrieve supplies from another base.

We had to travel through territory

that had not been declared safe by a Route Clearance Patrol
for some time.

We didn't normally do this.

As we drove to the area,

I got that same feeling that something wasn't right.

It was a small city with a fair amount of buildings,
but no locals showed up to greet us...not even to throw rocks at us.

There were bicycles, parked vehicles,
and trash that normally accumulates in an active market place.

But no people. I relayed my observations to the convoy commander. He ordered us to get out of the city as quickly as possible.

We drove over a bump in the road.

We landed on an IED, and it exploded.

My helmet and radio headset were blown off,
and I was knocked unconscious.

I was hanging out of the top of the vehicle
until my Lieutenant pulled me back in.

The Humvee was so badly damaged
that it lost power and would not start.

We were in total darkness,
wondering if this was the end for us.

Fortunately, the driver was able to get it started again.

So our Humvee limped its way out of the danger zone
at about 5 miles an hour.

We used a chain to connect to another Humvee from the convoy and got towed safely back to base.

We were all injured but we survived.

I thought we were all going to be OK. Just another close call.

What happened next changed everything.

I got a headache from the blast. Aside from that, I thought I was fine.

However, the doctors were concerned.

They said that 2 head injuries in 3 weeks

could cause serious damage.

So they told me I had to be medivaced to Bagram Hospital.

I felt ridiculous going to the hospital for a headache.

I wasn't bleeding. I had my arms and legs.

I only went because it was a direct order.

I got to the hospital and was waiting in a tent for my appointment.

While I was waiting,

I had a strange coppery taste in my mouth that I never had before.

I stepped out of the tent to get a bottle of water.

And then it happened. I had a grand mal seizure.

It felt like one minute I was outside drinking a bottle of water,

And the next minute, I was laying in the dirt.

My water bottle was crushed in my hand.

I had a lump on my forehead. And I had wet my pants.

I was wondering if someone sucker punched me.

Two soldiers were standing over me.

They told me I had a seizure.

They seemed kind of freaked out and they ran off.

I wasn't sure if I should believe them.

I was actually wondering if one of them hit me and knocked me down.

I was in a daze. So I saw the doctor.

And he told me that these seizures
can be caused by traumatic brain injuries.

The doctor recommended I go to Landstuhl hospital in
Germany for more tests.

At Landstuhl they did an MRI.

The MRI showed a sac of spinal fluid in my brain
where it should not be. It's called an arachnoid cyst.

These can be caused by trauma to the brain.

To simplify it...when you bump your arm,
you break blood vessels that make a bruise under the skin.

The bruise heals and the blood gets absorbed back into your system.

With an arachnoid cyst,

a trauma pushes a bubble of fluid into your brain that makes a cyst. And because the brain is
enclosed so tightly in the skull,

the bubble can get trapped in there.

It's vacuum sealed in.

And it puts pressure on things
that should not have pressure on them.

In some ways it can affect your brain like a tumor.

For example,

an arachnoid cyst can have different symptoms for different people.

It depends on the size of the cyst
and what part of the brain it's touching.

Some of them cause no symptoms at all,
and some can paralyze or kill you.

Mine is the size of a grain of rice and it causes seizures.

Also like brain tumors, some cysts are treatable by surgery,
some are not.

They would have to open my skull to take it out.

Sometimes just getting to the part of the brain where the cyst is
can cause more damage than leaving it there.

The doctor told me that, on a cellular level, the brain is like jello.

If you jiggle it a little bit, it's the same.

But if you do something to really disturb it,
like smash it against a wall, or set off an explosion next to it,
the cells will be damaged on a microscopic level.

You might not be able to see the damage right away,
but the damage is there.

And in time, cell by cell,
you will be able to see that it's not the same as it was before.

So I was sent to America to recuperate.

I was expecting to heal and then
come back to Afghanistan.

I didn't want to leave my unit, the 585th.

I knew that my unit was short staffed. They really did need me.

I felt a personal responsibility for the operation and a bond with the other soldiers.

I just wanted to heal as fast as I could and get back there to help.

On October 2, 2007, I came home on a plane with about 50 other wounded vets.

Some had head wounds bundled up in gauze.

Some were missing arms or legs.

Some were in cots hooked up to respirators.

And some were not even conscious.

We touched down at McChord Air Force Base in Tacoma.

The medical flights don't get the same homecoming you see on TV.

Crying spouses. Children jumping into their parent's arms.

Red, white and blue balloons. American flags waving.

That would be dangerous around all the medical equipment.

We were greeted by: an Army chaplain, a full medical staff, and a line of ambulances waiting on the tarmac.

Each one of us was taken directly to Madigan Army Hospital.

The doctors did a full assessment of my injuries.

In addition to the brain damage, which they call TBI for traumatic brain injury, I have a shoulder injury requiring surgery, and a compressed disc in my lower back.

As a result of the evaluation, I was reassigned to a new unit – the WTU or Warrior in Transition Unit.

I was shocked. I didn't think I would be reassigned.

I got a sinking feeling in my stomach.

I asked, "So as soon as I get better, will I return to my guys in the 585th of the 684th?"

They said, "No it's not guaranteed.

Your next assignment will be based on Army needs."

That's when I thought, "Maybe this is real."

As far as my health was concerned, my injuries didn't get any better but didn't get any worse either.

I had seizures about once a month.

I was placed on multiple seizure medications as we tried to figure out the best one.

After about seven or eight months of doctor appointments,

I heard the four words that broke my heart and changed my life forever.

Those words are: Not. Fit. For. Duty.

My case manager warned me this might happen so it wasn't completely unexpected.

But it was still hard to hear.

I had such a good record as a soldier.

I had excellent marksmanship skills.

I had a history of taking on extra responsibilities and getting promoted.

I had won the Van Autreve Award,

-- Engineer Solider of the Year.

It might seem foolish, but I hoped they might see my record
and let some of my injuries slide by and let me go back.

I still felt that I had tons of abilities.

I could still patch someone up.

I can still carry a solider away from danger...

I might hurt my back more- but in my heart, I felt I could still do it.

On the other hand, I understood why they classified me that way.

You can't hold a gun if you have seizures.

You can't drive a Humvee if you have seizures.

You can't protect your fellow soldiers.

In fact, you are a danger to them.

You are: not fit for duty.

So, emotionally, I wasn't done being in the Army.

But the writing was on the wall...it was done with me.

So, like it or not, I had to change my focus.

I started planning a transition to civilian life.

The WTU is an assignment for soldiers

who are recovering and trying to figure out

if they will be leaving the military or going back to active duty.

Between doctor appointments and physical therapy,

I worked on my resume and attended classes

on things like interviewing skills and computer software.

I was told that as of December 2008,

I was being placed on the TDRL,
or Temporary Disability Retirement List.

This means that the Army wants to wait
to see if your injuries gets better or not.

I will get an evaluation in 5 years—

which will be December 2013 - to see if I can re-join the Army.

During this time, I keep my military benefits like health coverage,

but my salary is decreased by about 45% percent.

My wife had our first son while I was deployed,

and we were expecting another baby, so I had a family to support.

I had to find a civilian job to supplement my income.

It was July, and I had to have a job lined up for January.

The economy wasn't in the best shape,

but I thought I would be able to find *something* by then.

All I needed was to get *one job*.

But I found out it wasn't that easy.

I had a few years of experience in construction.

But because of my seizure disorder,

I couldn't use a chain saw or power tools.

I can't walk on roofs, on scaffolding, or on any high buildings.

So construction jobs were out.

I had experience as a vocational nurse,

but to get licensed in a new state,

I would need to spend at least a year in training.
We needed income immediately. So that was out for now.
On top of this, in the state of Washington,
anyone with a seizure disorder is not allowed to drive a car
until they are 6 months seizure-free. I have never had this.
The longest I have ever gone without a seizure is one month.
To this day, I am not allowed to drive a car.
So I needed to find a job that I could get to without driving.
I had some strengths on my side, though.
I had a good work history.
As a noncommissioned officer,
I had some skills and experience in administration and leadership.
I set my sights on another federal job or a job with the prison system.
I probably sent out 200 resumes.
I don't know if I wasn't qualified,
or if I am just a bad resume writer.
But I didn't get any calls or interviews for about 5 months.
My wife and I were really worried.
We cut down on all our expenses.
We would only buy things that were a necessity.
And even then we didn't always have the money.
We started using a credit card to pay for basic essentials.
We racked up thousands of dollars in debt.
We were excited about having a new baby but also terrified.
I used to pray to God every night,

“Lord, please let me provide for my family.”

I started to panic and I sent resumes everywhere.

I applied to work at fast food restaurants and retail stores.

I even applied to wait tables in restaurants.

Out of the 200 resumes I sent out,

I got exactly 2 phone calls back.

One was a rejection for a management position at McDonalds.

But even a rejection call was better than nothing.

And the other was to set up an interview at a Sears retail store,
as a salesperson in the tools department.

I went to the interview at a Sears store in Lacey, Washington.

The interview went well and they offered me the job on the spot.

I remember I got in the car to go home,
and I was so happy I cried.

I breathed a sigh of relief and thought, “Thank you, God.”

The pay was pretty low.

It was below minimum wage, but with a commission.

Even if I were the top salesman there,

My entire paycheck for the month would not cover our mortgage.

Not to mention food or electricity or diapers.

But at least I had *something* coming in
while I looked for a better paying job.

I started a few days later.

What happened next is something I think was meant to be.

Someone came in to Sears looking for a combination kit

for a drill driver to work on his roof.

When I was processing his order,

he gave me his work email address, which ended with skookum.org.

I asked him, "Is that the same Skookum

that operates the central issue facility at Fort Lewis?"

He said yes.

I told him that I recently retired from the military

and turned my equipment in to his company.

He explained to me that Skookum hired people with disabilities.

I told him a little bit about my injuries.

That's when he gave me his business card and said

"We have some job openings, and I think we can help you."

He asked me to come in for an interview the next day.

My wife and I said a prayer that night.

I interviewed with Skookum, and I got a new job on the spot

as a Supply Clerk.

My responsibilities were to process and issue parts received

for the repair of military vehicles.

I received OSHA training and learned some new job skills.

It was safe for me to work there if I had a seizure.

So far I have not had a seizure at work but I have come close.

When I feel one about to come on I take medicine,

eat some crackers and follow my doctor's instructions.

I got some more good news in 2011.

I applied for a promotion at Fort Meade, Maryland, and I got it.

Skookum paid to move my family to Fort Meade,
just about 30 miles from here.

I am now the Safety, Quality and Environmental Officer.

I am responsible for making sure all the safety equipment
at Fort Meade is fully stocked and up to date.

I develop, implement and monitor quality control programs
and conduct inspections.

My family has a 3 bedroom home next to base, so I can walk to work.

We just had a new baby in April – another boy.

My wife is a stay-at-home mom to our three sons.

I have paid off all of our credit card debt, and I can pay all of our bills.

We take advantage of living in a new place.

We go sightseeing in Washington DC.

And visit family on the East Coast.

My life did a 360 degree turn after I got a job with Skookum.

I don't just think about surviving the here and now anymore.

I plan for the future. I can relax again and enjoy life with my family.

We are even helping out a family member
who is living in our house now.

It's a great feeling to be able to help someone else.

And that brings me to the reason why we are all here today.

We are here to plan for the future.

And as a group, have a lot in common.

Everyone here, including me,

has overcome the obstacle of having a disability and getting a job.

And while all of our stories are different,
in some ways they are all the same.
We have all had our share of difficult times.
When it came to getting a job,
our struggles caused us to feel frustrated.
Hopeless. Depressed. Even embarrassed.
I didn't like feeling that way.
And I don't want anyone else to feel that way.
Another thing we have in common is The Abilityone Program.
This Program helped all of us get jobs.
I don't know about you, but my job makes me feel productive.
It makes me feel useful.
It makes me feel confident and also proud.
We could just complain about how hard it was to get a job.
How difficult it is to have a disability.
How unfair life can be.
But instead, we are doing something about it.
We have joined together to be part of an important movement.
I understand that here are 29 self-advocates here today.
Every person's contribution is important this week.
And all of our stories are valuable.

Because when we bring awareness to our struggles,
we make it easier for the next person who comes along.
This week is not about us.

We already have our jobs.

We overcame that obstacle.

It's about the future now.

Does anyone here have a child with a disability?

How about a family member, or a friend with a disability?

We are here this week to help them, and every other person in America who has a disability and needs a job.

We are going to meet with our congressmen and congresswomen,

look them in the eye, and tell them that there is a program

that needs their support.

And they might not want to give us their support right away.

That is our next obstacle.

And if there is a group of people who can overcome obstacles,

I know it's us.

Good luck this week.

Thank you.