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Katy veteran now can say 'it only gets better'

David Thurman completes local triathlon as physical activity helps to keep him on the right path

By Natalie Harms | October 7, 2014

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Photo By Diana L. Porter/Freelance

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Katy resident David Thurman of Team RWB gets ready in the water for the swimming portion of the Katy Triathlon at Firethorne.



On a freezing February day in 2005, David Thurman got out of bed and looked in the mirror and decided to change the way he was living.

The then 210-pound U.S. Navy veteran, who had been an alcoholic and "done every drug put in front of him," drove to the Conroe YMCA and swam six laps before he stopped to catch his breath. He felt like he was dying.

Near him was a man with a U.S. Army hat. The fellow veteran encouraged Thurman to continue and said, "It only gets better." That moment inspires him every day.



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And it did get better for Thurman. He got healthy and trained hard, and he has completed several races and triathlons - the most recent of which was the Katy Triathlon on Sept. 28 at Firethorne.

The 22nd annual event, sponsored by the city of Katy, attracted almost 700 competitors, who swam 500 meters, ran 3 miles and biked 13 miles. Thurman joined about 20 other veterans on Team RWB, said Vicki Rao, triathlon coordinator for the Rotary Club of Katy, which organizes the annual event.

Team RWB, named for the nation's colors: red, white and blue, is a national nonprofit with regional chapters dedicated to bettering the lives of veterans by connecting them to others and encouraging physical and social activity.

"Physical activity is at the core of Team RWB's mission," said Dean Bradley, athletic director for Houston's Team RWB chapter and a fellow Katy triathlon athlete.

"Planning and executing consistent opportunities for the chapter to exercise together is critical to the chapter's success."

Bradley said that he sees a disconnect between veterans and civilians in the community, and Team RWB provides a place where veterans can feel like they belong.

"By helping to get our veterans involved in physical and social activities in their communities, we can help bridge that gap by helping to create opportunities for our nation's veterans, some of whom feel like they cannot deal with the pressures they are feeling or the physical and mental injuries they have suffered and continue to battle," Bradley said.

A retired Marine, Bradley got "addicted" to marathons and triathlons after running his first marathon and joined Team RWB after missing the camaraderie of fellow servicemen.

Thurman, 55, who now lives in Katy, joined Team RWB to help raise awareness for older vets like him who feel forgotten.

He learned about the Team RWB through a local volunteer/organizer Alain Ducante. Training for triathlons is great for his mental as well as physical well-being.

Thurman said he is also glad to have found the camaraderie of Team RWB, but he had a long, rocky path to where he is today.

In 1983, he served in Lebanon during the Beirut barracks bombings. He lost a few friends and saw even more returning home missing limbs, but carrying the weight of war on their shoulders.

"I had a man, a Marine, who couldn't take it anymore - his wife was leaving him, and he committed suicide in front of me. This was traumatic and affected me - still does."

For 30 years, Thurman has been suffering from nightmares, anxiety and depression, but it was only recently that he was diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

"Back when I was in the military, they diagnose you one of two ways," Thurman said. "They'd either diagnose you as with borderline personality disorder, as my psychiatrist put it, or as schizophrenic, which I wasn't. But, they didn't know what PTSD was. In Vietnam, they called it 'Battle Fatigue.'"

"They really didn't know what to do with us."

Thurman said that when he left the military, he felt like he was on his own. He said that he sees the resources that veterans have today and wishes they would've been around when he was discharged.

"A lot of the decisions I've made in life have been bad decisions because of what happened to me back then. It's affected my life for 30 years."

Thurman said exercise has been his therapy and credits it with saving his life. He trains once - sometimes twice - a day except Friday. He has a great support system and training mate in his wife, Holly. She was his high school sweetheart and six years ago they reconnected and fell in love all over again. She's an experienced marathon runner and constantly inspires him to continue to work hard.

He is working toward completing the Ironman Texas triathlon, but he hopes it goes a little better than his recent

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During the triathlon, Thurman got "mugged" in the open water swim portion. He feels most at home in the water - due to his experience in the Navy, but he was kicked twice in the ribs and once in the head while swimming. He said he knows this is always a risk and it slowed him down, but he was still able to beat his record from last year's competition.

But, performance isn't important to him because he recognizes the bigger picture of it all. So, when he crossed the finish line of the Katy Triathlon and was thinking that it did not go as well as he had planned, it was still a triumph.

Through exercise and training, Thurman has been able to turn his life around. And, through Team RWB, he is able to share in a community with veterans who have similar stories.

He is now able to do what the man in the Army hat did for him: Put a hand on a young veteran's shoulder and tell him that it only gets better.

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