

On the Blocks with Operation Homeland Honor

By Jenny Perrottet
LMSC Secretary



I saw the Eagle, Globe and Anchor tattoo on his back when I was warming down after an event at the South Carolina SCY State Championships. A Marine myself, I felt it only natural to say hello and wish him well in his upcoming races.

Mike was very engaging, we talked about where we had served and our military occupational specialties. He said that he had been injured as a mortar man in the line of duty, and that he now competes for Team Semper Fi, the Wounded Warrior Regiment and Operation Homeland Honor. He was representing Operation Homeland Honor (OHLH) at the swim meet, along with his friend, Humberto Reyna.

I admitted that while familiar with the first two organizations, I had never heard of the third. Mike explained that OHLH was established to provide an athletic outlet for state troopers, police officers, firefighters, emergency personnel and military service members who have sustained severe injuries in the line of duty. Mike told me he really loves the water and was very proud to be part of this new team. "Swimming has helped me get my confidence back. It has shown me that I can push myself to the limit just like when I was in the Marine Corps. When people see what I do and how much I try, it encourages them..." he added. Intrigued, motivated, and a little choked up, I thanked him, shook his hand and set out to discover more about this new team.



It just so happened that I had been sitting next to Kay Reyna, the founder and president of Operation Homeland Honor. I introduced myself and asked her to share her story.

Kay's husband, Humberto, (pictured on the left) was a State Trooper who suffered a traumatic brain injury four years ago. While investigating a collision, his vehicle was rear ended at 75 mph.

Kay says, injured people tend to find themselves in dark places. Humberto, due to his brain injury, does not talk much (especially in public) and requires 24/7 care and supervision. However, with help he can participate in swimming which motivates him.

Because Humberto was once athletic and competitive, Kay tried to get him involved in athletic competitions again, but found that there are very few, if any, athletic avenues in which he can participate and is accepted. This prompted her to start her own organization, so that those who protect us at home have somewhere to turn should they become injured.

Kay discovered swimming had many healing and therapeutic qualities when she took her husband to his first disability swim meet. "He was very anxious but, the meet directors were wonderful and they were accepting. We found a place of acceptance in swimming," she said. Swimming has been welcomed therapy for Humberto. "It motivates me to live to the next day," he said, "...it has given me a new life." Kay agrees. She feels that through sports, injured persons will become motivated to rebuild their lives.

Operation Homeland Honor was formed in January of this year and is a registered club team under the NC LMSC. Kay is excited that they now have 4 athletes: NC State Trooper (Ret.) Humberto Reyna, NY State Trooper (Ret.) Thomas Giannettino, PFC Michael Stafford (USMC), and SRA Travis Garrison (USAF). The athletes compete in golf tournaments, cycling events, triathlons, running events, and swimming. It is also a great social outlet for them.

Athletes are being recruited primarily through word of mouth and social media. Kay plans to visit rehabilitation facilities and hospitals this summer to talk with patients and leave brochures about the organization, in hopes that it will inspire patients to join the team and rebuild their lives. Tom Giannettino said, "I think the biggest message we wish to spread is that just because we now suffer from a disability, impairment, sickness and/or illness, we aren't dead...we can adjust our lives and focus on what our abilities are, not what we can't do."

The next planned swimming events for OHLH are:

Powerade State Games (Charlotte, NC) - June 28-29, 2014

USMS Summer Nationals (College Park, MD) - August 13-17, 2014

Fred Lamback Disability (Augusta, GA) - October 25-26, 2014

Kay said that there are several ways in which people can offer support for her organization. "Sponsoring a member for an event would be phenomenal" she said, because the team members come from across the country and travel expenses to the competitions add up quickly. She is also looking for people to assist with some of the unique safety requirements during these events. Donations can also be made on their website. "All monies go to support the athletes. There are no salaries paid. Volunteers of any type would be great", says Kay. For more information about the organization and how you can help, please visit www.operationhomelandhonor.org.