

Whitney

These shoes were the evidence of that tipping point – each pair of shoes was tossed up into the trees by a cadet who gave up and went home, someone who could not find the inner resilience to keep on keeping on.

A few weeks ago, I was in Portland, Maine, where I happened upon a fundraising and awareness walk to educate about and prevent suicide among veterans. Through Project Silhouette, life-size black silhouettes dotted the hillside overlooking Casco Bay. Attached to the back of each silhouette was a profile and photograph, personalizing the darkness of suicide. Project Silhouette is one way one mother found her resilience to work toward making sense of – or perhaps just accepting the reality of – her son's suicide.

She observed, "I did not see the signs. He was young and making his way in life, and I did not see the signs."

"No one sees the signs," said Brandon Schuster, a former Marine who lost friends to suicide. "There are no warnings. It can be one moment, one trigger that tips the balance. The important thing is the transition experience that starts the last few days before you are out," she explained.

"Five years ago, our transition was horrendous – five days of de-personalized, dry PowerPoint presentations, presenting too much information so fast that you were lucky to write down a phone number. It was a de-humanizing transition – death by PowerPoint. I hope that transition training has improved by now."

The opposite is the case at Patriot Resilient Leader Institute, also known as Camp Resilience, a veteran resilience program headquartered throughout the year at the Gunstock Inn in Gilford.

Camp Resilience began in

2014 with the vision of Kurt Webber, retired U.S. Army Officer, '79, West Point graduate and Iraq veteran. One day Webber and his friend Greg Martin, a retired major general, also of West Point, were skiing at Gunstock and were caught off-guard when someone swooshed by them. They saw a skier with no arms. This striking example of adaptive skiing stuck with them.

Could the beautiful outdoor opportunities in the lakes region of New Hampshire be a setting to help veterans transition back to civilian life?

Since Webber wanted to utilize Gunstock Ski Area for his outdoor programs, the Gunstock Inn offered a logical fit – with its lodging and restaurant, a year-round pool, workout rooms and a conference/classroom. From the start, Les and Linda Schuster, owners of Gunstock Inn, embraced the project, offering lodging and amenities at a discount.

Their nephew, Brandon Schuster, helps manage lakes region hotels for his aunt and uncle.

In 2014, the all-volunteer Camp Patriot Resilient Leader Institute, led by Webber, offered two events, expanding to four events in 2015; six events in 2016; and last year, 12 events with one monthly. All retreats incorporate life-skills training with outdoor activities: hiking, rock climbing, kayaking, sailing, swimming, horseback riding, ropes course and skiing.

In the last two years, Camp Resilience has refined its offerings to reflect particular needs of veterans in divergent three-day retreats including: Spouses & Caregivers Retreat; Couples Retreat; Equine & Service Learning Retreat; Women's Retreat; Retreats for Veterans with Substance Dependency; Adaptive Sports Retreat; Family Retreat; and Collaborative Retreat with Project Healing Waters Fly Fishing.

Camp Resilience sponsors three-day stays at Gunstock Inn, all meals and all activities at no cost to the veteran. The only thing asked of the vet is a

refundable \$75 deposit.

A Marine Corps mantra states: *Improvise. Adapt. Overcome.*

On some primal level, all veterans can relate, recall or identify with this idea of resilience. It is, after all, an imbedded language common to military training – with its structured environment; the democracy of shared experience; built-in community; and the challenge and comfort of teamwork aimed at a common goal. Transition back to civilian life often is opposite from military life.

In the absence of built-in daily structure, the chaos of too many distractions and too many choices, coupled with the loss of a sense of purpose, can increase the isolation that comes from a loss of a peer community.

Camp Resilience seeks to help veterans find and reclaim their inner resilience as they transition back to civilian life. A key component in this experience lies in building an atmosphere of trust. By finding common ground, veterans communicate more openly with each other, share common experiences and benefit mostly from the immediacy of peer-to-peer camaraderie, encouragement and counseling.

Don Morrissey, retired USAF officer, Vietnam veteran and PRLI publicity manager says: "There is nothing like the community of veterans. They immediately feel comfortable with other vets. I recall seeing two combat vets connect in such a way about the topic of their experiences with their marriages that they both were brought to tears," he said.

"It was a clear connection. Of course, the themes of teamwork and collaboration are built into these outdoor challenges and activities. This is another way that vets connect with each other. They have all faced such challenges, and they have faced obstacles."

For more information, see Patriot Resilience Leader Institute: "Helping Those Who Served Bounce Back in Mind, Body and Spirit": www.prli.us.