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In a military family we all serve**Shara Ruffin**

Social worker, Psychotherapist, USA

The focus of the speech will be to shed light on the sacrifices made by the hidden heroes in our country, military families that stand behind the service member. Military families face unique challenges including long separations, frequent moves, inconsistent training schedules, late nights in the office and the toll of mental and physical injuries on both the services member and the family that can be devastating if the proper support is not in place to address challenges that arise. As a former military spouse, four years ago, I faced one of the most challenging hardships in my life. Being a new military spouse and new mother, while facing the fact that my new husband, a non-commissioned officer in the Army was “volunteering” to go back to Afghanistan, ten months post-deployment from his last tour. During his previous nine-month deployment to Kabul Afghanistan, I had given birth to a stillborn daughter, which left me and my husband devastated. Upon his return, we were just starting the process of healing.

I had a whirlwind of emotion going through me. How could he volunteer to go back? We just got back on solid ground? Does he not want to be near me? We just started a family. My husband told me that he needed the money to get out of debt. Three weeks after my son Jaedan was born, he left for his deployment training in Fort Polk, Louisiana and I was left to care for my son in Philadelphia. I struggled to manage my own mental health including untreated anxiety, post-partum depression. Four weeks post-partum, I went back to work as a mental health provider, while managing the demands of single parenthood. I struggled to seek and maintain my own mental health treatment. When my son became five months old, he became terribly ill. He was taken to Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia for evaluation in the Urology department and was diagnosed with Ureteropelvic Junction Obstruction (UPJ). Due to the extensive blockage in his kidney, I was told by a specialist that my son would have to have surgery at six months. I was scared to death, however, I knew he had to have the surgery due to him being in a lot of pain. For the next several months after his surgery, his life was filled with numerous ultrasounds;

specialist visits and emergency room visits due to Jordan’s weakened immune system. The stressors of taking care of a sick child; managing my own mental health; balancing a full-time job with single motherhood and the geographical distance of my husband had detrimental effects on my marriage which ended in divorce due to these stressors related to the military lifestyle. My story is a testimony to the importance of providing adequate care to our military members and their families to promote wellness, education regarding mental health. As a mental health provider, I have dedicated my work toward that cause.

Biography

Shara Ruffin is a licensed social worker and psychotherapist at a partial hospitalization program in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She holds a bachelor of social work degree from the Lock Haven University of Pennsylvania and a master of social work from Howard University School of Social Work. She provides therapeutic support to enhance the lives of others with specializations in grief and loss, veteran behavioral health, mindfulness meditation and trauma counseling. Shara is a member of several professional organizations including the National Association of Social Worker, International Association of Trauma (IAPT) and the Pennsylvania Society for Clinical Social Workers (PSCW). She is currently in the process of writing her first book, a memoir focused on her experiences of struggling with her own mental health, juggling single motherhood, while working on her own journey to happiness and stability.

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