

Good Morning,

My name is Valerie Pallotta. People say our son, Joshua, was a hero. His last post on Facebook was "I see death in every thought. They taught me how to put this uniform on; I just can't get it off". These are lyrics to the song "A Soldier's Memoir" by Mitch Rossell. I have provided the words to the whole song. I encourage you to read it and listen to the song as soon as you have a chance. Josh's last text to his father was a link to this song. His last post on Facebook was "I see death in every thought. They taught me how to put this uniform on; I just can't get it off." He sent this song to all of his friends and his loved ones. He wanted everyone to have a better understanding of what he was going through. This song describes what PTSD was like for him. It's a song that describes what so many Veterans are going through.

It's been only 6 months since we lost our son. 25 years, five months and 20 days: that is the amount of time we had our son. In reality, it was 21 years, four months and one day because our son never really came home from Afghanistan.

At 3:37 on the morning of September 23, 2014 my husband and I were awakened by a loud knocking at the door. When I looked out the window to see who was knocking at that hour, I saw two Burlington Police officers. My heart started to race as I knew it had to have something to do with Josh. 'He's been arrested' was my first thought. My head started pounding and my ears started ringing. I felt like I was going to pass out. I remember just like it was yesterday, opening the door as they asked if I was Valerie Pallotta. I heard myself answer "Yes" through the ringing of my ears. I tried to stop my heart from pounding so hard. I tried to stop shaking. They asked if my husband was home. I vaguely remember my husband admitting he was Gregory Pallotta when they asked.

I remember them asking if they could come in. I wanted to scream 'NO!'

"I'm very sorry to tell you that your son is deceased."

'NO! This can't be true. I thought he had been arrested. His PTSD was bound to get him arrested at some point. He had so much anger. So much pain. He's in jail. He's not dead. This can't be.'

I knew in my gut that our son had ended his life before I asked the question.

Our son was pronounced dead from a self-inflicted wound at 2:17 AM, September 23, 2014 at the age of 25. His death certificate should have stated the cause of death as PTSD/TBI. Not from a self-inflicted wound.

Joshua Rodney Pallotta left behind a childless mother and father, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, countless friends and loved ones and his brothers-in-arms with whom he had trusted his life.

The sleepless nights, the headaches, the physical pain, the anger, not eating, nightmares; these are all signs of PTSD. Not only has PTSD taken the life of our son but it has taken the life out of us. Our spirit died the day our son died. We lost our only child that day to something that should have been prevented. We used to have so much spirit. The light, that love, that spirit is gone forever in us. I cry almost Every.Single.Day. I am wracked with guilt Every.Single.Day. It takes all that I have to get out of bed, after another night of not sleeping, because my mind races with thoughts of how we could have done things differently; how we could have saved our son. I'm his Mom. I should have been able to save him.

It has been six months and it's still challenging to do everyday tasks. I force myself to eat and go to work. It has been six months. It has only been six months.

This is our life. Our minds are at the funeral home crying over our son's body as it lays cold. We are kissing him and hugging him and trying to wake ourselves and him up from this awful, horrible nightmare. Our minds are at the Veterans' cemetery in Randolph, the place our son was laid to rest by his brothers-in-arms; a place we have not been able to visit since the burial because it is too painful. Our minds are in Afghanistan wishing we could have been there to protect him; to shelter him from the pain he endured for 4 years. I have been fighting for Veterans for years through my work with Blue Star Mothers of Vermont. I was the chartering President! How can this be MY son lying there dead from a self-inflicted wound, a wound caused by PTSD, invisible wounds he couldn't heal. We couldn't heal.

Our son was deployed to a combat outpost in Afghanistan, COP Herrera. I hadn't realized how dangerous a location it was until August 22, 2010. That day, I received a call from my son. "Mom, I'm ok but I can't talk. You'll find out soon enough. I just want you to know that I'm ok. We're shutting down communications for now." Then I received the call from my friend, another Mom from my son's unit, two of the Soldiers who were with our boys had been killed; SSG

Steven DeLuzio and SGT Tristan Southworth. I found out just recently that our son was standing right next to Tristan when he was killed. Our son's life, the lives of his brothers in arms and the lives of all of our families changed that day.

Our son was awarded the Army Commendation Medal with "Valor" that day, 22 August 2010. He was awarded the medal for valorous achievement while assigned as a motor assistant gunner for 3rd Platoon, Alpha Company. "His selfless service and dedication to duty were in keeping with the highest traditions of military service". The full narrative of the day that forever changed our son's life is attached in your handouts.

That same day, two years later, August 22, 2012, our son posted the following on his Facebook page:

"I don't know where to start... Southy and D were loved by all people that knew them. It didn't matter what happened, those two would always have a smile on their face. When they walked into a room, they had the power to make everyone's day just a little better just with their presence. They were truly the best people that I have ever known, and they paid the ultimate sacrifice for the freedom that so many people take for granted nowadays. Not a day goes by that I don't replay this horrible day in my head...always thinking what I could have done differently, always thinking about why I am here and these two guys aren't. Why am I so special to make it home, they had a hell of a lot more going for them when they got back...2 years ago today, the world lost two amazing men that can never be replaced. Gone but never forgotten. R.I.P SSG Steven DeLuzio and SGT Tristan Southworth, KIA August 22nd, 2010. Rowqian village, Paktya province, Afghanistan.

He then wrote: "Always wishing it was me instead of them".

He lived with pain every single day; emotional, physical and spiritual pain. He saw their faces every day. What our son and his brothers endured that year of deployment is something you would never wish on your worst enemy. The things they saw on deployment are burned into their heads; visuals that aren't going away. Suicide bombers, seeing their limbs, scalps and a head just lying on the ground with eyes open. A young boy who was doing yard work hit a Russian landmine and was missing his face, an arm, some fingers on the other hand... this boy choked to death on his blood in a med evac. One of our son's best friends was his escort; a little girl came in for treatment because her father and uncle had burned her feet so badly that she almost lost them.

Our son was a casualty of war just like Tristan and Steven. There were over 900 people at our son's funeral. If that is the number of people affected by just one Veteran's suicide, imagine the number affected by 23 Veteran suicides every, single day.

Our son lost his battle with PTSD and so did the rest of his family and friends. For the rest of our lives we will wonder what we could have done different.

There needs to be change. We need to find out from our Veterans what's working, what isn't working. What do THEY want and need.

I asked Josh's brothers-in-arms to share their thoughts and frustrations so that I could share them in this testimony. One of them said he feels like heroine and opiate addiction takes priority, especially in Vermont. From his experiences with PTSD and TBI he feels like he's slowly deteriorating. He sleeps three hours a night if lucky. He hasn't slept in the same bed with his wife since returning home in 2010. He's restless and has night terrors just about every night. He replays events from deployment and tries to figure out ways for them to save the men they lost. He's easily distracted at work by loud noises and hammering which causes him to leave his work area to let his heart slow down. He goes through this every single day. He and our son talked things out many times and kept each other going. They agreed to fight this ongoing battle together. Josh's unit had a pact, to fight this together. Our son's buddy was going to end his life a little over five months ago because "I am just tired of the fight, the struggles, marriage issues, sleepless nights..." The only reason he said he is here today to share his feelings is because of his 4 year old German shepherd and peer counseling with our son. Our son lost his fight. Now that our son is gone, how will his friends keep fighting? How does one go on and 23 a day cannot? We need to find that out.

There is a strong feeling among Veterans that the counselors who work at the VA are only there to get a paycheck and that they could care less about what is going on in the Veteran's mind or in their life. Many addressed the lack of compassionate counselors at the VA, counselors who spent time during their visits checking their watches. They are frustrated by lengthy intakes with no follow-up appointments and the over prescribing of medications. One said: "What we as Veterans need is someone to talk to who can share some of the same experiences from past deployments or a counselor who has been in the military before and doesn't just feed us medication to mask our depression, anxiety,

PTSD or anything else.” Another said the therapist had to look through her notes to remember his name. The counselors don’t relate to their situations. They act like it is an inconvenience and waste of time talking to the Veterans. They act like our Veterans are crazy and give them medications to mask their problems and make them feel like zombies.

Some of the Veterans in our son’s unit who admitted to having issues after deployment were sent to a Warrior Transition Unit (WTU) at Fort Drum, NY before coming home. They were isolated in the back of the barracks with no transportation and in the middle of nowhere. Why would you isolate a Veteran who admitted to struggling with PTSD or other issues? They lost cohesion. They lost unity. One Veteran told me he never heard from his Unit while at the WTU until they heard he was going to be discharged. He was then sent a letter with his next Drill dates. Our son told us he didn’t admit to having issues when they were coming home because he just wanted to get home and see his family and friends.

The process for Soldier Readiness Checks (SRC) that happens during Drill weekends needs to change. Veterans told me if you admit on the questionnaire that you are having an issue you are pulled out of the line and moved into another area. They feel exiled; singled out. The questionnaires at SRC and the VA are not accurate tools of assessment. Some Veterans aren’t truthful when answering the questionnaires so this data being collected is not accurate. This is a broken system. Instead of singling out those who need help, treat them all as if they all need help, because more than likely they do.

I asked my son’s brothers-in-arms how many have attempted or thought about suicide. 60% had attempted and 100% had thought about it. This is a problem. We’re still talking about the same issues we’ve been talking about for years and nothing is getting better. It’s getting worse. We need to educate more people on the effects of PTSD and TBI, especially our church leaders, teachers, businesses and the community at large.

People gave up on Josh. People tried to help. He didn’t want the help so they moved on. This is the point where we need to be proactive, even though the Veteran might say they don’t want the help. His Outreach caseworker gave up on him. He told me he couldn’t waste his time if Josh didn’t want the help. Josh was not receptive to his visits so the caseworker gave up. His caseload was too high for him to keep spending time trying to help Josh if Josh wasn’t receptive to him. He had other Veterans who wanted the help. Josh wanted the help; he just didn’t know what he needed. Didn’t his caseworker recognize this was the PTSD? Maybe his caseworker should have pushed our son more and not given up on

him. They tell me “they can’t force the Veteran to seek help”. He was a 21 year old male. The system is broken. There have to be checks and balances. Josh fell through the cracks after being medically discharged. The signs were there. He ended his 4 year relationship with his girlfriend, he was in chronic pain and self-medicating and a job he finally found that he really liked, was ending due to the company closing. He felt like he was always taking one step forward and two steps back.

Many administrators say that the resources are out there but the Veterans have to come to us. Despite this, many of our Veterans are still afraid to ask for help because of their pride. They are afraid to talk about feelings. They are afraid of repercussions for seeking help. They are asking for Vet to Vet counseling. They need to be heard. Rather than letting Veterans who served our nation become ticking time bombs, listen to them. Give them what they are asking for. Our Veterans deserve better. Our son deserved better.

We have lost our son forever. Our son lost his battle with PTSD and so did his family and friends. For the rest of our lives we will wonder what we could have done different.

After researching what our Veterans want and need, I have a vision for a Veteran Transitional Wellness Center. It’s a Center that is supported by fundraising and philanthropists; a place that incorporates both traditional and complementary therapies like acupuncture, aromatherapy, massage, meditation and yoga but will also have a pool and a gym for physical therapy and a way to get the stress and anger out. Also part of it will be a recreation center with a pool table and video games. A place where the Veterans can just hang out and be with each other for that Peer to Peer support. I also envision a transitional living community for Veterans to get back on their feet. I envision gardens that the Veterans will cultivate and sell the harvest.

We need to end to the bureaucracy in getting our Veterans the benefits, resources and support they deserve so that our Veterans only focus can be on healing themselves and their families.

As I close my testimony, I ask you, what would you do if you saw your loved ones struggling so much? What would you do if that was your child lying there... lifeless... because he or she could not fight this fight any longer? Our son will never get married, never have children. We will never have grandchildren. Our only hope and prayer is that somehow, someday his death will be the catalyst to finally be the change to improve care for our Veterans.

Thank you very much for this opportunity to speak with you today.