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Presenter: There are few things that make people successful. Taking a step forward to change their lives is one successful trait, but it takes some time to get there. How do you move forward to greet the success that awaits you? Welcome to *Next Steps Forward* with host Chris Meek. Each week, Chris brings on another guest who has successfully taken the next steps forward. Now here is Chris Meek.

Chris Meek: Hello, I'm Chris Meek, and you've tuned into this week's episode of *Next Steps Forward*. As always, it's an honor and a pleasure to have you with us. Today's guest is Mike Erwin. Mike graduated from the United States Military Academy at West Point in 2002 and served 13 years on active duty, including three deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. While earning a master's degree in positive psychology and leadership at the University of Michigan, he founded a nonprofit organization, Team Red, White & Blue, with the mission of enriching the lives of America's veterans.

He currently serves as the 234,000-member organization's executive director. In 2015, Mike co-founded The Positivity Project, a nonprofit organization to empower America's youth to build positive relationships. With 654 partner schools, the organization reaches 388,000 children daily. Mike Erwin is also the co-author of *Lead Yourself First*, which focuses on how solitude strengthens people's character and their ability to lead with clarity, balance, and conviction.

Mike continues to proudly serve the nation as a lieutenant colonel in the US Army Reserves. He's assigned to the United States Military Academy, where he's an assistant professor in the Behavioral Sciences & Leadership department. Mike Erwin, welcome to *Next Steps Forward*.

Mike Erwin: Hey, great to be here, Chris. Looking forward to the conversation.

Chris: No, thanks for your time, sir. Before we begin, I'd be remiss if I didn't thank you for your continued service, so thank you, sir, and all of that. Mike, I've been doing the show for over three years now, and I've got my notes here. I don't think I've ever had an introduction fill an entire page, so we pride ourselves on a lot of firsts here on the show, so that's a first for that, so thank you.

Mike: Yes, absolutely.

Chris: Mike, you're often described as an enthusiastic and optimistic leader. What is the source of that enthusiasm and optimism, and where does that wellspring come from?

Mike: Yes. When you think about how to describe yourself, there's this idea of resume versus eulogy, and the idea of you can look at what you've accomplished, what's on your resume, and then you can look at your eulogy, which is your character, who you are, how you made people feel. As I think about those words, enthusiastic, optimistic, grateful, they're really part of my character.

A lot of it comes from my upbringing. I had wonderful parents who pushed me hard. Neither of my parents went to college. They both said, "Hey, we want our kids to go

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on and to earn a degree," so that was part of our thinking from the very beginning of, how can we reach our full potential? At the time, that was certainly, I think, going to college. We can have a conversation on that later. I'm not sure that that's necessarily the same 30 years later as it was back then, but I think that a lot of my background on that is sort of God-given, it's DNA, it's genetics. We're all encoded differently.

You can see for those-- I'm guessing this is mostly audio, but if you were to see it, you can see that I talk with my hands, I talk fast, I talk with a lot of intensity and pace. That's just naturally who I am. In fact, it sounds really weird if I were to talk in a very low-key, balanced, measured way. People are like, "Are you all right?" Because it's just not me. I think a lot of it is just genetically who I am.

Also, I have sought out, from education to organizations, I've been a part of things that really give me energy. When you think about things in life that consume energy versus give you energy, I participate in and lead and I'm involved in a lot of things that are energy givers. To me, that makes my ability to be grateful, my ability to be enthusiastic a lot easier. I think it's that combination of nature and nurture.

Chris: You served in three combat tours with the 1st Cavalry Division and 3rd Special Forces Group. With your deployment to Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2004-'05, that involved the battles of Fallujah and Najaf. We know that Fallujah and Najaf were among the most vicious and deadly battles our militaries fought in several years. I work with a number of veterans who have experienced post-traumatic stress, and I can't help but ask, how did your time there affect you? Was your positivity something you took with you? Were there after-effects?

Mike: To walk you back a little bit, when I was a plebe, a freshman at West Point, 1998-'99, I spent a lot of time in that plebe year feeling sorry for myself. Life is hard. I was only getting about five and a half hours of sleep a night. There was lots of stress. At the end of the day, no one was shooting at you. In terms of safety, you were safe, but there was so much pressure and stress that it was easy to feel sorry for yourself. I did that a lot. At the end of my freshman year, my parents actually handed me a bunch of the letters that I had written home and some of the emails that I had written home in my first year.

I looked at them in aggregate, and I was like, "Wow." I was really looking for a pity party. I really committed to, after that freshman year, to making a change and saying, "Hey, I'm going to be going through hard times for sure, the pressure, the adversity, but it doesn't do me actually any good to make other people-- pull them into that with me," to make them sit there and say, "Jeez, I feel so bad for Mike right now. He's only getting five and a half hours of sleep a night."

That was part of my mental shift that I started to make as a cadet. I was able to apply that in my time in service, and especially on deployments. Again, far from home. Now this time, there is a risk for your health and for your safety. You're eating poorly, you're sleeping on cots, all those things that make it not very easy to always bring cheer to the given day. Then the seriousness of it, that we were sometimes losing soldiers, and soldiers were being severely wounded. That also took a toll on me psychologically.

Overall, my role as an intelligence officer was to support the warfighter, support the infantry. Eventually, when I went to 3rd Special Forces Group to support Green Berets on the ground, I was not out there on the CONOP, on the objective of being shot at, or potentially blown up. I did go out on some missions, and there were some times when I got shot at, and things like that. Ultimately, my experience, especially in the battles of Najaf and Fallujah in August and November of 2004, were very formative events in my life because it was more HIC, high-intensity conflict, than it was counterinsurgency. It was more what war felt 50, 75 years ago in World War I and World War II.

Yes, there was a degree of intensity there that was hard to describe. Certainly, something that, as much as I was prepared for it, I really wasn't. Ultimately, I was able to grow through that process because I was able to observe what was happening, and I was able to fulfill my role as an intelligence officer. We were successful, tactically and operationally, in both battles, which also helped.

All of that coming together made those to be actually very formative and positive experiences for me. Even though it was violence and it was a lot of things, it actually made me more resilient, it made me tougher. No showers for 34 days in the battle of Najaf. My uniform, my military uniform could stand straight up. It looked like it was like cardboard because it had so much salt in it. When you go through those things, it gives you confidence in the ability to know that you can withstand a lot. I was able to apply that understanding and that logic to the rest of my life.

Chris: In the face of adversity, including being in life-threatening combat zones and separate from family and friends for such long periods of time, what coping mechanisms or strategies do you find most effective for maintaining your mental and emotional well-being?

Mike: Mental and emotional well-being is certainly a hot topic in the world today, especially in America, as we think about how do we maintain that, as the world around us sometimes seems to spin out of control, and there's things that are outside our control. For me, a lot of my mental well-being, it stems from my faith, for sure. I've grown a lot stronger in my faith over the past 15 to 20 years, but that played a big role.

Tied into that is solitude, the topic of my first book, *Lead Yourself First*, that I co-authored with Ray Kethledge, focused a lot on solitude. I would take walks, and in my mind, I would work my way through my problems, my challenges, and my emotion, the emotional roller coaster of just the given day. I miss home, being homesick, hearing that there's a unit that's out there, troops in contact, it's really hot out, I'm really hungry.

Think of all the things that converge into your world, and I was able to unpack a lot of that in my walk, about a mile to the dining facility, each direction. I ended up walking for about 35, 40 minutes every day, and I would almost always go on my own. I then applied that, fast forward, later in 2009, '10, and '11, when I was at grad school at the University of Michigan, when founding Team Red, White & Blue. I'm a huge believer in solitude, turning inward, that's a chance to talk to God, that's a chance to get inside your mind and to listen to your heart and to understand what you need to do.

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I'm a huge believer in that as a coping mechanism. The other coping mechanism, which seems like it's the other sides of the coin or it might even seem antithetical to solitude is relationships. Arguably, one of the best coping mechanisms out there behind our faith and leaning into our faith and leaning into it and really listening to our soul and to the message that God has for us, I believe is also people.

When we think about relationships, in the psychology lesson of healthy coping, other people, relationships are right there at the top of the list. Those people are there for us when we're struggling. When we're having a bad day, they can pull us out, they can reach down with a hand and help pull us up. They can just listen if we just need to vent or share our frustrations or share our worries with them. One of the other best coping mechanisms is people.

Chris: How do your fellow service members contribute to building a sense of resilience within the military unit? How does that camaraderie influence resilience in situations where you're under stress and on your guard 24 hours a day, seven days a week?

Mike: Going back to this idea of the role that people and other people in relationships play in resilience, when you think about camaraderie and the brotherhood of a tight-knit unit or a team or even a friendship, that's camaraderie. I think that is absolutely essential to being resilient. I love the way-- thinking about resilience through the lens of it's the ability to persevere through, to adapt to, and to learn from adversity. Ultimately, you do all those things better when you have other people in your corner.

Nothing we do-- even the most successful individual athletes or pianists or singers or individuals can only be so successful on their own. They've got coaches, they've got supportive families, and we need an ecosystem of people around us. Life is a team sport. I think that's the reason why we're better at resilience when we have camaraderie, when we have relationships.

As your question just alluded to, Chris, the higher the stakes, the more the pressure, the hotter the kitchen, we use whatever analogy you want. The more that is happening, the more important those relationships become because ultimately, even the strongest, most resilient people can eventually crack under some of that pressure. When we have those relationships, we can lean into them. Those people can be there to support us. I think that's a really important thing to never lose sight of because I do see this happening in the world a lot today.

The world has gotten increasingly individualistic and a lot of people think that they can Zoom in or participate virtually, or they don't need a community as much as they used to. If you've ever read the book *Bowling Alone* by Robert Putnam in 1997, that's a very real conversation today that I think a lot of people have forgotten what it is like to be a part of a meaningful community. Therefore, they're missing out on the camaraderie and the capacity to be more resilient because that community supports them.

Chris: Were there any mentors or leaders in the military who play a significant role in shaping resilience? If so, how do they influence you?

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Mike: Like a lot of people in the military, I had great examples of leaders and poor examples of leaders. I think pretty much anyone you talk to, probably in any sector, but definitely in the military, will say that they experienced both ends of the spectrum. Yes, I had some tremendous leaders. I was very fortunate. I had a couple of wonderful battalion commanders. Then Lieutenant Colonel, now full General Jim Rainey was my battalion commander in the Battle of Najaf and Fallujah.

He's currently the commander of Futures Command outside Austin, Texas. He was phenomenal. He came into our unit actually at a time of leadership crisis. Our battalion commander and Sergeant Major were both relieved by Major General Chiarelli, the commander of the 1st Cav Division in May of 2004. Coming into a moment of leadership crisis, he provided a lot of stability. He really leaned in and showed us what it was like to work hard, but also to keep calm under pressure.

That was a wonderful example. Then I had, in my time at 3rd Group, in my time at West Point, lots of different leaders that played a significant role in my life, especially in terms of being resilient. Then Lieutenant Colonel Jim Rainey is probably the one who comes to mind the most because I was the youngest. I was 24 years old. I was the first lieutenant. Boy, was it a combustible situation in Iraq. The Abu Ghraib prison scandal had just emerged. It was starting to get really, really intense in Iraq. We'd just lose our battalion commander and Sergeant Major. He came in and really calmed things down in short order. That was something that I'll always remember 20 years ago.

Chris: You mentioned General Chiarelli. I've had the pleasure and honor of meeting him a few times. One of my favorite stories of him is how he would always mock President Bush for slaughtering his last name with his Texas accent and call him General Chiarelli. That's one of my favorite things about him, but also the work he's done in his retirement from the military in terms of mental health and one mind. Just a great American, great patriot, great hero.

Mike: Absolutely.

Chris: You mentioned earlier your faith and your solitude. How big of a role did faith play in your resilience and well-being while in Iraq and Afghanistan?

Mike: Yes, it played a really big role. The reality is when I was back garrisoned as a lieutenant and as a young captain, I was busy traveling, running marathons. I would still make it to mass. I'm a Catholic, so I would still make it to mass on Sundays when I could. It was not the top priority in my life. The old saying, there's no atheist in the foxhole. Certainly, the more pressure you find yourself in, the more you find yourself just instinctively turning to God for a sense of understanding, a sense of peace, a sense of-- Sometimes some people are in a sense of desperation.

For me, while in my 20s, when life was good, when there was no pressure, when I was back in the States, traveling, partying, running marathons, my faith was moderately relevant to me. Over there, on all three deployments, all of a sudden it became very important again. I found that time again in solitude, on walks, and on runs by myself in both combat zones where that solitude and that conversation with God was instrumental to my mental well-being.

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This is a thing-- Look, I know they say you should never talk politics and religion, something like that with people because you can ruffle people's feathers, and I get it. Everyone's got different views politically, different views from a religious standpoint, but I think it's something that is really hindering the resilience of America and the resilience of a lot of people in the world today is a lack of willingness or a lack of interest in talking about faith because it doesn't have to be that you have to believe what I believe, but certainly the belief in a higher power that is responsible for making all of this.

Chris, I think about this and it just blows my mind. We're traveling around in an orbit around the sun at an estimated 67,000 miles an hour. It's everything from the tides to the moon to the sunrise and the sunset is all predictable because it's like clockwork. You're like, "How does that happen?" Then you think about photosynthesis and oxygen and carbon and how it all comes together. To me, that's a big part of the conversation that I think we should be having more. It's not like you should believe what I believe or that I want to push my views on you, but I should be pushing views on you to think of somehow to make sense of what is your relationship with your higher power.

Look, some people who don't believe-- I would push people who are atheists. Why is that? Because to me, I think it's very difficult to be resilient if you can't make sense of all the suffering and all the problems of the world in light of the role that God has played in creating all of this.

Chris: You had three deployments. How was your adjustment period for you each time you returned home? Did it take the same amount of time to begin to feel safe again? Or was there a cumulative effect?

Mike: For me, my first year in Iraq, I came home, and no, I was, I think, pretty young, 24 years old. Came back home and just picked up, again, going to different parts of Texas and traveling and seeing different parts of the country. Then when I was in 3rd Group and I came back in '07 and then I came back in '09, for me, the big part was after my third deployment in '09 because I came back to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and then I went immediately to grad school in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

For me, that transition was by far the most complicated because I went from a military installation to a state that didn't have-- I believe it doesn't even have an active-duty military base. The state, while it certainly understood the military, it sends its children into the military, it's not like Texas or North Carolina or Florida or lots of other states that have got big military bases.

For me, that was a much more difficult transition, which is honestly, which led me to create Team Red, White & Blue in early 2010. The creation of that was driven by my transition from Afghanistan to North Carolina, to Michigan in all a matter of six weeks, and it was very disorienting, and I thought to myself, "Jeez, how do--" and I was still in the Army. I was still being paid. I still had medical insurance and all that because the Army was sending me to grad school. I was like, I can't imagine being a service member who leaves the military and just jumps right out into the civilian world like that. That would be wildly complicated and challenging.

Chris: Let's stick with the University of Michigan for a moment. How are you feeling this year with the football playoffs?

Mike: Oh, yes, better this year than last. When I was there, ironically, the football team was terrible. I started doing some leadership work with the basketball team, which went on to have two Final Four appearances, 2013 and 2018, I believe, with Coach John Beilein, but the football team was terrible when I was there. It's crazy to see, these years later, I think they're looking really good. Their defense is just unbelievable. I think they got a really good head about-- keeping their head on their shoulders amid all the success that they've had.

I didn't feel great last year. I had a feeling it would be tough for them last year. Of course, they got knocked out by TCU, but I think that they've got as good a chance as any, I believe, to take home the national championship this year.

Chris: It feels different this year. I agree, I agree.

Mike: Yes.

Chris: All right, back to more serious stuff. In what ways do you think the military could improve its support systems for veterans' mental health and well-being?

Mike: When you think about mental health, I view it as a sliding scale. That means that for some people because, again, I think sometimes they hear the word mental health or health and well-being, and they often conflate that with mood. Mood is not mental health. We're going to be, as human beings, in good and bad moods. I'm in a good mood when I get off the Jacob's Ladder or the Concept2 RowErg or I go for a ruck or a run. I feel in a bad mood when I swipe on my Instagram feed for 20 minutes on the couch when I could've been doing something meaningful like reading a book or talking to my kids.

Our mood will oscillate throughout the given day based upon what we're doing. For me, I think mental health really is much more a conversation of systematically, how are we structuring our lives? What are we prioritizing into our lives? To me, certainly, the military and veteran community-- let me say two sides of the coin. The military, clearly, when you're in the military, active duty guard reserves, the military does have a partial responsibility for your mental health because it has a direct application to how well you can do your job.

I think the military has been taking this certainly more seriously over the past 15 to 20 years. Go back to General Rainey, Then Lieutenant Colonel Rainey, he talked about doing "PT for our minds", training for our minds, just like we do for our bodies. I think that was a really powerful way of looking at it and explaining why it's important to work on our resilience and work on our mental strength.

When it comes to the veteran side of it, this is where it gets tricky because you're no longer owned by the military, controlled by the military. Depending on what you do, if you go work for yourself or you go work for another company, it gets a lot trickier. What we do at Team Red, White & Blue is we really emphasize agency, the power

that veterans have over their own mental health, and by specifically tapping into a couple of things: physical activity and community.

Relationships and exercise are two things that are at our fingertips. Hiking, walking, running, rucking, four things, four ways you can take the ankle express. They cost you basically nothing. You can do it almost anywhere. You can walk out your door, walk out wherever you're at, and you can get in steps. I think that's where the conversation's got to go. It's not about being a CrossFit animal or being able to do specific yoga poses or do an Ironman, those are all great if like that's your thing.

I think the conversation has to move to movement. Walking, hiking, running, rucking. For me, that's where my mind goes, where the veteran community, this is the leadership that Team Red, White & Blue is trying to provide to the veteran community. We're trying to challenge veterans to know the power that they have over their own mental health and well-being by moving their body, and then ideally moving your body alongside somebody.

It can be one person, it can be a workout buddy, it can be a running buddy, it can be a kid, a spouse, and sometimes, yes, on your own. Sometimes you go out there and just go for a walk on your own, go for a run on your own. Give yourself space to clear your head. If you can come together in that combination of getting outside, moving your body in solitude, getting outside, moving your body with other people, talking through things, you've got a powerful one-two punch to cope with the stress and the adversity of life. That's really what we're doing at Team Red, White & Blue.

Chris: *Lead Yourself First*, not surprisingly given the title, you write, "Leadership is a relationship, but the first person you must lead is yourself." Different people have different definitions of leadership. How do you define a good leader, and in what ways does one need to lead themselves before they can lead others?

Mike: I spent some time, I had the huge honor of spending time with one of my great mentors, Jim Collins, the author of *Good to Great* and *Built to Last*, just one of the world's most prolific thinkers about leadership and about organizational culture and success. He said, "Hey, after spending all this time studying all these various definitions of leadership and studying all these different leaders," he concluded, and therefore I concluded, that his favorite definition, what he believes to be the most complete and the most accurate, is that leadership is the art of getting other people to do what needs to be done because they want to do it.

That comes from, it's inspired by General Eisenhower, General/President Eisenhower. It's this idea, and I'll just break it down real quick. It's four parts. It's an art, not a science. The world is obsessed with algorithms and optimizing things. Ultimately, leadership is an art. Yes, you can apply science and learning and research, but it's an art. Two, it's about getting other people to do it. If you're the one doing the work, then you're doing the work. Leadership is really about getting other people to do.

Part three, what needs to be done? I say this frequently, but anybody can get somebody to binge-watch Netflix or to do something very easy. It takes leadership to get somebody to do something that's hard, that's uncomfortable, that isn't fun. Then

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the last part of that is because they want to do it. If someone does something out of fear or because they're afraid they're going to get yelled at or because they're afraid that they're going to get in trouble, that's really power.

That's not leadership, at least not leadership at its apex. At the highest point, in its purest form, as Jim Collins writes in the foreword of *Lead Yourself First*, in its purest form, leadership exists when people follow and they don't have to. That's my favorite way of thinking about and framing up leadership for myself, but also as I engage in and I talk to other people about it.

Chris: We've been talking to Mike Erwin and we'll be right back after a short break.

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Presenter: You are listening to *Next Steps Forward*. To reach Chris Meek or his guest on the show today, please call into 1-888-346-9141. That's 1-888-346-9141. Or send an email to chris at nextstepsforward.com. Now, back to this week's show.

Chris: We are back. I'm Chris Meek, host of *Next Steps Forward*. My guest today is Mike Erwin. Mike graduated from the United States Military Academy at West Point in 2002. He went to serve on active duty for 13 years, including three deployments to

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Iraq and Afghanistan. He founded a nonprofit organization, Team Red, White & Blue, whose mission is to enrich the lives of America's veterans. He currently serves as the executive director to the 234,000-member organization. Co-founded The Positivity Project, a nonprofit to empower America's youth to build positive relationships.

Mike continues to proudly serve the nation as a lieutenant colonel in the US Army Reserves, assigned to the United States Military Academy at West Point, where he is an assistant professor in the Behavioral Sciences & Leadership department. Mike, before the break, we spent a lot of time talking about leadership. Beyond the old, "Walk the walk, don't just talk the talk," admonition, how should somebody who wants to be a positive and enthusiastic leader promote or instill those same attitudes among team members?

Mike: Yes. Instilling optimism or gratitude or enthusiasm in other people, I think by default, one of the best ways you can do it is by your example. If you don't demonstrate these things by your example, then I think it often feels either contrived or hypocritical or whatever it might be. Use whatever word you want because if you're telling me this is important, but you don't demonstrate it yourself, it's like telling someone to be humble, but you're not yourself.

It just really comes off as being comical to arrogant, somewhere in between there. I think the biggest thing we can do really is the power of our example. Then think about the conversations we have. The reality is some people are not-- Let's just take enthusiasm. My wife, out of her 24 character traits, enthusiasm is number 24 for her. It's number one for me.

The reality is she is not going to be enthusiastic about very many things in life. That's just not her default. It doesn't mean that she's not as excited about things as I am. It just means she doesn't demonstrate or show it accordingly. I think sometimes we can have conversations with people and explain to them, "Hey, just so you know, by not showing enthusiasm, it's often harder to interpret if you're actually having fun or not. Are you enjoying this dinner or not?"

I think that sometimes there's all kinds of teachable moments in life where we can have conversations. Then we also learn from those conversations. We're not just the teachers in those moments. We're the students because we learn from other people as well from how they're thinking about a situation. Again, by your example, and then through conversation.

Chris: Now, at the same time, how do you balance being positive and enthusiastic with the need to maintain the leader-follower hierarchy, so you can provide constructive feedback or address performance issues rather than the team member thinking everybody's just friends and then anything can go?

Mike: Yes. This is the part about the military, obviously, where it's very natural to this conversation. Between non-commissioned officers and commissioned officers, it's sir, ma'am. There's that line there. I remember when I was a cadet hearing my tactical officer, my tactical non-commissioned officer talking about this, about why this is a thing.

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Ultimately, there could be a moment where you need to tell someone the officer needs to give the order. "Hey, we need to take the hill." It's if you're two buddy-buddy, if you're two friends, it's like, "Hey, Bob." "All right. No problem, Mike." Or, "Hey, Mike, I don't think we should do that." There is a degree of separation. I think sometimes it comes with power and the hierarchy.

I think that you see this sometimes in special forces units, often the officers are called by their first name by their soldiers. It can work where you don't have that separation. I don't know. I think that sometimes the separation really does help. I think it helps us to just remember that there might be a situation here where I'm called to put my life on the line or put my safety on the line here.

That is the challenge. How do you build deep, meaningful, powerful relationships, but at the same time, do it in a way that does not overstep the bounds of professionalism? It is tough. I think it's doable, but it definitely takes more intentionality and more thought.

Chris: There are ranks for a reason.

Mike: Yes. for sure. Again, most of the time it's probably not that big of a deal, but in those pressure cooker moments when perhaps things, the stakes are the highest, where it might become a problem, in the military or in any unit or any organization where you might have to put your life in the line or ask someone else to go do that if you're the leader.

Chris: I agree that there are ranks for a reason. That's what I say to my wife, "Yes, ma'am." Totally understand.

Mike: [chuckles] That's right.

Chris: You founded Team Red, White & Blue while you're working on your master's degree. The classes weren't hard enough to keep your attention or what?

Mike: Yes. I came out of the deployment to Afghanistan where I was working probably 16 to 17 hours a day. My work engine was just-- the pistons were firing on all cylinders and you don't just come home. At least I don't. I don't have the person that just comes home and says, "Let me have as much downtime as possible." For me, I found it very useful to pour myself into something else. That something else was Team Red, White & Blue.

Grad school, I took, I think a total of 12 credits per semester. I worked on my grad school thesis, but honestly, I had probably all in 30 hours of work, academic work between reading, writing, stats class, et cetera, et cetera. I was used to working 90 hours a week. I was able to just scale that debt back to 60 hours a week. Put 30 hours into-- it was almost a full-time job starting Team Red, White & Blue.

I had that time and I found it actually very cathartic and helpful for me to make a difference for veterans, to make a difference for the military community at a time when I was going through some guilt probably, that, "Hey, I wasn't over in Afghanistan where the surge was taking place." I was here, back in Ann Arbor, Michigan. For me, it was very helpful on multiple fronts.

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Chris: Did you conduct any formal research or needs assessments within the veteran community to better understand the requirements and preferences for support, or was the need just so obvious that simply screamed out to you that something needed to be done?

Mike: Great question. I met with MSW, a social worker at the Ann Arbor VA hospital, and said, "Hey, if I was to start a nonprofit organization, what is the need? What would it be?" I had a sample size of one, but she had a sample size of about 150 because she was a case manager for about 150 different post-9/11 veterans. She was able to see over 100 veterans, what their struggles were, what their needs were. She then was able to draw her conclusions and then pass that on to me.

Initially, I went to grad school and the Green Berets in my unit basically said, "Hey, Erwin, you're going to go to grad school and you're going to get soft. You're going to stop exercising," because I was known as being a big runner and being pretty fit. As the intel guy, that was one of the biggest ways that I gained credibility with Green Berets was that I was very fit. They teased me on that and made that prediction that I was going to go to grad school and get soft.

Initially, the idea was, "Hey, we're going to form a team of people who run marathons or ultra-marathons and Ironmans and raise money by doing that to support veterans." That was the idea. It became pretty obvious through the conversations with her and with other people in the space that actually the biggest need that veterans had was the community, was relationships with somebody to have a coffee with or to go out to dinner with or to go on a run with.

That's really what Team Red, White & Blue became focused on was that, how do we mobilize Americans, veterans and non-veterans, to step up and to help veterans, in their periods of transition? Ultimately, it was kind of obvious to me, but at the same time, it wasn't. It really was having conversations and learning from people like Jen, who were able to paint that picture for me.

Chris: How has Team Red, White & Blue evolved and adapted over time? By that, I mean have you collaborated with other veteran support organizations or government agencies?

Mike: Yes. A great question. We started out very much as a veteran transition and reintegration organization for our first decade. We certainly collaborate with lots of different organizations, but the big thing that we've done, Chris, over the past couple of years is we've evolved from being really focused on transition from service and reintegration into civilian life to building a health and wellness community.

When you look at the need for support that veterans had to reintegrate, especially when a lot of them were coming right out of a combat zone and they were transitioning within two, three, four months into civilian life, a lot of veterans really, really struggled with that. As the government's gotten better at it through the SkillBridge program and by pushing service members to start their transition process 18 months out, there's been some big steps taken that have made it a little bit less challenging for veterans to transition.

The big thing here is that when it comes to health and wellness, there's pretty much nothing out there. You leave the military, and if you're disciplined and highly motivated, and you're passionate about physical fitness and your physical and mental health, and then you go, you on your own, go join a CrossFit gym or a yoga studio or a running group or whatever.

If you don't, if you don't find that or you can't afford that, we are really the only show in town, so to speak, in the veteran nonprofit landscape that has 150-plus chapters across the country, and just a national team that you can join by wearing the eagle and by going out to a park or a local event and just wearing the shirt and getting people excited about it, supporting the military and veteran community.

What we do is, from my view, obviously I'm biased, but it's very, very important. I think that this is a big part of the conversation for Team Red, White & Blue as we move into the future is how do we keep building out this health and wellness community? Because the reality is it's getting harder and harder to be healthy in the world today. As food gets more mass-produced and more convenient, as we have more screen time and more things drawing us into our computers and our phones and our televisions, all those things make it easier and easier to be sedentary.

You've got to be really intentional about being healthy in the world today. If you just go through doing the status quo and doing what most other people are doing, you're going to end up very unhealthy. That's just a hard truth. What we do, I think at Team Red, White & Blue, by focusing on health and wellness through community is only going to get more and more important as AI expands and as the world gets more digital and more challenging for people to be healthy.

Chris: You just touched on health and wellness. What's your long-term vision for the organization and how will you measure success 5 or 10 years from now?

Mike: I think the long-term vision really is for us to reach a lot more veterans. That might sound boring or obvious, but that's the long-term goal. It is very noisy in the world today. There are so many different books and podcasts and organizations that want to help veterans. The list goes on and on. There is just so much out there. We know what we do works. We know what we have going is powerful.

How do you, one, break through all the noise so that veterans actually know we exist, and then motivate them enough, go back to leadership, get other people to do what needs to be done, motivate them enough to be able to join Team Red, White & Blue and become active? Ultimately, the long-term vision here is to add a lot more veterans into the organization, but then also to become active in the organization because that's where the real transformation takes place.

I don't have hard numbers set on it, like, "Hey, we want to be a million members by 2030," or something like that. You can "buy" members via acquisition on social media and digital marketing and all that. The way we grow most of our membership base is in real life and by one-on-one conversations. People will post on social media. They'll be at a race. They'll see someone running with the flag or wearing the eagle.

A lot of our growth, Chris, is organic, which means that a lot of people come to Team Red, White & Blue, for the right reasons. To me, the goal would be really, how do we keep growing? How do we engage people so that they're not just a member, they don't just think they're like a name and an email address on a listserv, but they're actually a real member of a real community who wants to help them out? I think that's really what the long-term vision is for what we're going to do.

Chris: I can attest to that. It was about seven or eight years ago, I was doing some work with a Boston-based organization called the Home Base Foundation. They have this run in Fenway and through Boston, it's about a nine-mile run, I think, called the Run to Home Base, which is really cool. You start out in right field, you run through Boston a little bit and come back and you cross home plate is the finish line. Team Red, White & Blue had not just a small army, not quite a battalion, but there were a lot of T-shirts and eagles flying there. This was seven, eight years ago.

Mike: Yes, that's awesome. I love to hear that. Yes, I know, I can almost see the picture. If I can't see the exact picture, I can see what it looks like in my head. It's powerful when you see that.

Chris: No question. Just for those who haven't participated in that, I highly encourage you to. I'm a huge baseball fan, I'm a Yankee fan, so Fenway's a little tricky for me. The coolest thing was when you come in and you come in through right field and go around the left field line, as you come down third base, they're all active duty military there cheering for you. As you cross home plate, they shake your hand and thank you for doing the run. It should be the other way around, obviously, but it's just a powerful thing to experience.

Mike: That's awesome. Cool to hear that.

Chris: How do you think society can better understand and support the unique challenges faced by military veterans in terms of mental health and well-being?

Mike: First of all, there is just a reality, that if you've not served in the military, there's a certain amount of the experience that you can't necessarily understand. What's really interesting, I think a lot of the research is starting to show this, that a lot of the mental health challenges and struggles that veterans have actually stem from their earlier childhood and from their lives before the military.

In other words, what you would find is that a lot of veterans who might be terrorized by PTSD or who might really be struggling from what they saw in war, that's definitely true. A lot of veterans, especially that are getting out now who've served in the past 8 to 10 years have never deployed. That's just a product of when they joined, when they were born. It's just the luck or the bad luck of the draw, depending on how you look at it.

Veterans' experiences, even within the military, are going to be drastically different. Some people who are Green Berets or infantry on the front lines or aviators or cooks or Intel people. Even if you're in the same infantry unit or special forces unit, you're going to see a wide array of different experiences. I think it starts with, getting to know a little bit of their story, getting to know a little bit of their journey. "Hey, where

were you in the military? What did you do? How was it to be deployed? When were you scared?" Those are some, I think, thoughtful conversations that can unfold between people, whether they've been in the military or not, and veterans.

Beyond that, I think that there are certain things that just work for mental health, regardless of whether the source of your stress or your PTSD or your anxiety is the military or not. It's things like physical activity. It's things like relationships, those kinds of things, healthy coping mechanisms. Those are things that we can all do, regardless of our background, regardless of whether we were in the military or not and what our struggles are.

We can tap into some of these strategies, some of these coping mechanisms either way. I think that just reminding sometimes we, veterans or not, need to be reminded that we are more powerful often than we think. To me, this is a part of the solution here. Part of what we do at Team Red, White & Blue is reminding veterans that, "Hey, you've been through a lot. You've done a lot in your military career."

Just by making it through basic training and making it through AIT or making it through Beast Barracks or let alone a deployment or multiple deployments, you've been through a lot. If you have been through that and you have, yes, maybe come out with some bruises or scars, but you've made it through that, you can make it through the transition. You can make it through the difficult chapters of your life that are yet to come. I think sometimes that's just giving veterans the confidence to know that they have the character to be able to make it through hard times because hard times are coming for all of us, no matter who you are.

Chris: Of course, knowing how you're wired, you didn't stop with just one nonprofit. You also co-founded The Positivity Project in 2015, which is very different than Team Red, White & Blue. What was your motivation and how have things unfolded over the past eight years?

Mike: It starts from Dr. Chris Peterson, who is my academic advisor at the University of Michigan. He was one of the founders of the field of positive psychology. I studied under Chris for two years at Michigan. He suddenly and tragically died of a heart attack in October 2012. About 15 months or so after I left Michigan, he was actually supposed to come and speak at West Point two weeks later before he died.

That was really hard for me emotionally. He had played such a pivotal role in my life. When I came out of my third combat deployment, I was becoming a parent for the first time, working on my first book, starting my first nonprofit. It was a very busy chapter of my life and he was a real big part of that for me. One of it started with a way to honor his legacy, a way to entrench his focus on character strengths and relationships.

Yes, that's where the idea started from, really was a tribute to Chris. I partnered up with one of my friends from West Point, Jeff Bryan, and we started this out with one school and it was very rough around the edges. "Hey, here's a rough idea of how I would teach the 24 character strengths and what we call the other people matter mindset." Those teachers and the principal and the counselor were like, "Hey, this is

powerful. This is a great lens to look at teaching kids how to be better human beings, teaching them how to build good relationships in their life."

Yes, we went sort of whole hog, full boar, and went from one school to 33 and then 33 to 188 and then 188 to 525. We were growing like wildfire in those first three or four years, much like Team Red, White & Blue in the first three or four years, we caught lightning in a bottle. We reached a lot of schools who were really interested in, "Hey, how do we start to work with our students on being better human beings, having more character, being able to connect with and to build relationships with other people?" Just at a time when more educators were thinking about that, we had a powerful solution.

Chris: How can people learn more about both organizations and provide their support?

Mike: Yes. Either ones, the websites teamrdb.org and posproject.org are the two websites. You can join the team at Team Red, White & Blue. You don't have to be a veteran. 70% of our members are veterans, but 30% are military family members or just great Americans who support veterans.

The Positivity Project is really relevant. If you've got children in school, if you're in education, if you know people in education, you can look into that and say, "Hey, what is the strategy that my children's school or the school that I teach at, what is our strategy to build better humans?" Because it's no longer just about teaching math and reading and writing, it's what are we doing to develop things like integrity and humility and gratitude and forgiveness in children so that they can demonstrate these character attributes for the rest of their life because it will serve them for the rest of their life.

Chris: We have about two minutes left. You've been such a resilient and optimistic leader. Please share your words of wisdom for our listeners.

Mike: First of all, thanks for having me. I appreciate it. I think any conversation around resilience, around character, around Team Red, White & Blue, veterans, mental health, these are all things that I think about all the time. Yes, I would say the biggest takeaway for me as I think about one of the big ideas that bridges all these different things together is this idea that other people matter.

Dr. Chris Peterson at Michigan, he would go around the world giving talks as one of the founders of positive psychology and he would make this joke and he would say, "Hey, if you don't want to listen to me talk for the next hour, just give me one more minute." I can sum up positive psychology in three words. Other people matter, period. Anything that builds relationships in and among people is going to make you happy.

The number one driver of life satisfaction is the quality of our relationships. Relationships matter to our resilience. They matter to our ability to go through life, to solve problems, to build organizations, you name it. I said this before, but life is a team sport. To me, that's the big thing. At the same time, relationships are very

complicated. Other people are very complicated. They wear us down. They are challenging. That does not mean that the juice is not worth the squeeze.

Let me say that positively. The juice is worth the squeeze. Leaning into relationships, yes, you're going to have some fractured relationships along the way. Yes, you're going to have some bruises and scars from other people who betray you or hurt you. Ultimately, those relationships and those interactions with other people are still the magic and the beauty of life.

Chris: Mike Erwin, thank you so much for being with us today.

Mike: Absolutely, Chris. Thanks for having me. I really appreciate it.

Chris: No, thank you. Thanks to our audience, which now includes people in over 50 countries, for joining us for another episode of *Next Steps Forward*. I'm Chris Meek. For more details on upcoming shows and guests, please follow me on Facebook at facebook.com/chrismEEKpublicfigure, and then X, formally known as Twitter, at [chrismEEK_USA](https://twitter.com/chrismEEK_USA).

This is our last live podcast of the year as we take time off for the holidays. The entire *Next Steps Forward* crew wishes you and yours a safe and happy holiday season. We look forward to seeing you in the new year. Same time, same place. We talk with another leader from the world of business, politics, public policy, sports, and entertainment. Until then, stay safe, and keep taking your next steps forward.

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Presenter: Thanks for tuning in to *Next Steps Forward*. Be sure to join Chris Meek for another great show next Tuesday at 10 AM Pacific Time and 1 PM Eastern Time on the Voice America Empowerment Channel. This week, make things happen in your life.