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Caregivers for wounded warriors share their stories

By **Jennifer Calhoun**
Staff writer

After her son lost his leg in an IED blast in Iraq, Luana Schneider soon learned there would be an entirely different battle to fight.

And this time, she was part of it.

Schneider, the primary caregiver of retired Staff Sgt. Scott Stephenson, was charged with muddling her way through paperwork, Army forms, medical orders and the emotional issues that came with her son's trauma and loss.

But, like her son, Schneider survived.

Now, she's helping other people who take care of our nation's wounded warriors.

Schneider was part of a panel of caregivers and wounded warriors who spoke during the second annual USO Wounded Warrior and Family Caregivers Conference on Wednesday.

The seminar was part of a two-day event focused on providing resources, tips and tools for wounded warriors and their caregivers.

On Wednesday, the conference focused on caregivers, with speakers discussing compassion fatigue, caregiver burnout, signs and symptoms of suicide and depression in military members, and building skills that renew compassion.

"The recovery process can be just as hard (on family members and caregivers)," said John Campbell, the deputy assistant secretary in the U.S. Department of Defense. "No one is getting off easy in this process."

Campbell said he came to the conference so he could hear the concerns of wounded military members and their caregivers and families.

Caregivers, he said, are "the ones who really hold the silent vigil," and "the glue that holds it all together."

Whether they're worrying over early surgeries, distributing the medications or learning the complicated workings of the military systems, their role is varied, complex and integral to the process, he said.

Other speakers included Kim Ruocco, director of suicide prevention and education for the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors, or TAPS.

Ruocco's husband, Marine Maj. John Ruocco, killed himself in 2005 after a tour of duty in Iraq.

John Ruocco had suffered with post-traumatic stress disorder and depression, and was set to return to Iraq when he died.

Kim Ruocco described her husband's depression and reluctance to get help during the weeks and months leading up to his death.

She also gave the warning signs of suicidal behavior, including a lack of interest in activities that once brought them joy, disillusion with leadership, agitation and anxiety.

Dr. Kim Norman, a psychiatry professor at the University of California, San Francisco, offered ways caregivers can reduce compassion fatigue, which can leave people feeling depressed, anxious and emotionally exhausted.

"Be aware of your needs, emotions and limits while accepting and acknowledging that we are changed by what we do," Norman said.

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