ADVERTISING FEATURE

# Our war against PTSD

**LIGHT OF MY LIE** Claire helps Chris in his darkest hours

Credit: Karen Herman Wright

## National Lottery-supported Trafford Veterans is a life-saver for troubled ex-servicepeople – including its two founders

**EVERY day when Claire Wright walks in through her front door, she is filled with tension. Will her partner Chris be there and will he be alive?**

This is what it's like to live with an ex-serviceman who has complex PTSD and has attempted to take his own life three times.

"There have been times I've come home from work and he's taken an overdose," says Claire. "Once he went missing and had overdosed on tablets, but thankfully we found him in time. It was a massive cry for help."

Claire, 46, admits it's hard to live with a partner who's struggling with their mental health. "It does have an effect on you, being with someone who feels they're not good enough and wants to take their own life. It's caused me my own mental health problems."

Chris Squires, 36, left the Army in 2013 after 13 years, serving two tours of Iraq and two of Afghanistan, and losing 13 fellow soldiers. Despite his troubles, he is devoted to his and Claire's joint family – they have four children between them.

"What's good is that we've stayed together and a lot of the military don't," says Claire. "I've been his rock and he's been mine. I reason with him – we've got children here, we've got family; we need to think of the bigger picture."

Claire also served in the Royal Navy, but left in order to start a family.

"I was a helicopter engineer and I'd just come back from a tour in Sierra Leone in 2000," she recalls. "We'd been away for seven months, and seeing children from Navy families on the dock at Portsmouth, looking blank and not sure what was going on, influenced my later decision to leave when I got married and was expecting our daughter."

> "We're here if you need company and a chat. We want people to know they're not alone

Since then, Claire has struggled to settle into civilian life. She joined the police and has worked for various charities. But her own mental health has taken a hit from supporting Chris. It was their joint challenges that prompted the couple, who live in Trafford, Greater Manchester, to set up the National Lottery-supported Trafford Veterans.

"Sometimes you just need to talk to someone who has been through the same thing you have," says Claire. "We're there if you need company and want to pop in for a brew and a chat. We want people to know they're not alone."

Trafford Veterans started in May 2015 with one table and some leaflets, but it soon grew. "We began to signpost people to other organisations and military charities," says Claire. "We started with a veterans breakfast event. There's such camaraderie and a whole mix of ages – we have cadets speaking to World War II veterans. It gives them something to look forward to."

Claire and Chris encourage volunteers to share hobbies and skills. "We've got an allotment project, a model-making and craft group, a minibus for day trips and a football team," says Claire. "The group was set up to help veterans, and we aim to help them settle back into the community – though we also welcome emergency workers with similar emotional challenges. Setting up the group has given me a purpose and it helps us both a lot."

Trafford Veterans continued to support its members throughout the lockdown. With National Lottery funding, it managed to buy Kindles and reading materials as well as deliver food to people who were self-isolating.

"Most of the people we support are over 70," explains Claire. "The money that was donated by The National Lottery helped us to make sure they weren't alone through the coronavirus lockdown." That money comes from the £30million* you help raise every week for good causes by playing The National Lottery.

"We've done this with a shoestring budget and sheer determination," says Claire. "Our aim is to have a veterans hub in the borough so there's a safe place for them to come to get career and mental health advice. There's a sense of pride in the veteran community, but we still need support."

**SERVICE DAYS** Claire and Chris in the forces

## 'HELP'S THERE AT THE END OF THE PHONE'

### Army veteran Martin was homeless and broke, until National Lottery-supported Veterans Aid stepped in...

**NOT ALONE** Martin knows he can rely on Veterans Aid

Six years ago Martin was diagnosed with a genetic heart condition that almost destroyed his life. He walked into Hammersmith Hospital a fit and active 52-year-old ex-squaddie and left a frail old man, afraid that every day might be his last.

"It changed my life from that moment," says Martin. Suddenly I felt vulnerable. It's like I'm falling apart."

Martin joined the Welsh Guards when he was 16 and left after 10 years when a job opportunity opened up in the United States.

"In retrospect I wish I'd stayed in the Army," he says. "It's like losing a limb. Being in the military is a language and an emotion, and you don't you realise that until you've left."

Martin had a good career in IT, but gave it up in 2000 to care for his elderly parents in the UK. But it was when he was diagnosed with cardiomyopathy – an irregular heartbeat – six years ago that his world fell apart.

"Everything changed. I couldn't go back to full-time work and take the stress anymore," he says. "The doctors have had to stop my heart and restart it again six times in order to get it beating regularly."

Martin cashed in his pension and stocks but the money ran out and he ended up sleeping on friends' sofas. Then someone told him about Veterans Aid, which has benefited from National Lottery support.

"I called them and they found me a flat in Earl's Court in August this year and helped me sort out some benefits – something I've never done before.

"Veterans Aid has been the limb I lost. It's just knowing someone's there at the end of the phone. I can't speak highly enough of them."

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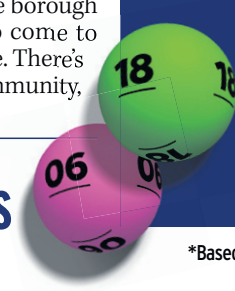

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