Adapting to a new normal

Dr. Kenneth Lee combines his experience as a combat-wounded veteran, his knowledge as a rehabilitation doctor and enthusiasm for adaptive sports to bring positive changes to the lives of those around him.

Veteran of the Year is at the forefront of adaptive sports initiatives.

Daddy, you don’t smile anymore.” Five honest, simple words signaled a turning point for Dr. Kenneth Lee. The Army National Guard veteran, who had struggled for years with the dark aftermath of his wartime injuries, was soon on the long road to personal acceptance and treatment. Today, through adaptive sports, he helps others and has earned his place as
the 2017 DAV Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year.

The journey began in 2004, when Lee deployed to Iraq as the commander of Company B, 118th Medical Battalion. He oversaw medical treatment clinics in Fallujah and Abu Ghraib—where he revamped the detainee care system earlier in the year after the well-known scandal broke—and he worked tirelessly over several days to save wounded Marines during the Fallujah offensive.

But his life changed that September during a routine convoy. An improvised explosive device had been found in their path, and Lee and his team had dismounted their vehicles to augment the rear security.

“I heard a car screech, so I turned around, and this car was heading straight toward me,” said Lee. “The only thing I know is my soldiers told me they found me under a car.”

Hit by a suicide car-bomber, Lee sustained an open head traumatic brain injury, numerous shrapnel wounds to his legs, severe nerve injuries and the onset of post-traumatic stress disorder. Despite his pleas to return to his unit, those injuries ended his deployment prematurely. Lee was treated at two Army hospitals in Iraq, transferred to Germany and then to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center where he spent four months. He underwent five major surgeries and extensive physical rehabilitation.

Lee—who is married with two children—said he and his family experienced a miserable two years after he returned home from Iraq as his brain injury intensified frustrations that strained their home life.

“I remember bashing everything in the basement because I was so angry all of the time,” said Lee. “My kids were always afraid of me and didn’t want to do anything with me.”

As a physician, Lee said, he was embarrassed and could not accept that he had PTSD.
“He would sit down at a window and just look outside for many, many hours,” said his wife, Kate. “He needed to get his life together.”

Then those five words, spoken by Lee’s daughter, Leah, struck a chord.

“My daughter and I were playing a board game and I wasn’t really into it, but she just stopped playing the board game and just said, ‘Daddy, you don’t smile anymore,’” said Lee. “I just started crying, and she ran away. Something hit me. I needed to do something, or I was going to lose all of my family.”

Lee, who is chief of the Spinal Cord Injury Division at the Milwaukee VA Medical Center, said that accepting his diagnosis of PTSD was the first domino to fall.

“The most important thing is accepting it,” Lee said. “Because I didn’t accept it, and I wouldn’t acknowledge that I needed the treatment. Two years it took to accept it, and then it took another year to figure out that this is treatable, so it was a long haul.”

Lee is a rehabilitation physician as well as a volunteer physician at the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic, which the VA and DAV co-host, so he was no stranger to using adaptive sports as therapy. After his retirement from the Guard in 2013, he dove into the adaptive sporting world headfirst.

“Adaptive sports is a growing area of activities,” Lee said. “We all know it does positive things for mental and physical health. I think people will see that adaptive sports are the way to go for health care. I see it becoming more popular. I see it becoming a more cost-effective way of treating [patients].”

Within a year of his retirement, he formed the Milwaukee
Wheelchair Lacrosse team and hasn’t slowed down since. He is also the president of the Wisconsin Adaptive Sports Association (WASA), which runs numerous adaptive sports programs.

And as a combat-wounded veteran, Lee has a special connection with many of his patients and the athletes participating in his adaptive sports programs.

“Dr. Lee introduced me to adaptive sports,” said Alan Lewis, who lost both of his legs when a land mine blew up his Humvee in Iraq in 2003. “The impact for me was immediate. I remember the first time getting in a chair and playing basketball and just feeling that competitive edge again.

“For me personally, anything I need I can always go to [Lee]. He is like that big uncle that you always need. Whether it is adaptive sports or personal, I know I can go to him. I know I can confide in him, talk to him, and I know he will be there for me.”

This fervor for helping fellow veterans earned Lee a nomination as DAV’s honoree for 2017.

“Dr. Kenneth Lee’s leadership in the adaptive sports arena not only exhibits his passion for his fellow veterans but changes their lives,” said National Adjutant Marc Burgess. “His perseverance and dedication to his family, to his work and to his fellow veterans is something to emulate.”

“He represents the new norm that we have today, and that is citizen soldiers being deployed to combat zones and being put in positions of danger in midlife and midcareer,” added John Polk, commander of the DAV Department of Wisconsin. “Then they have to come back and resume their life again, and he represents that very well.”

Lee, a DAV life member with Chapter 19 in Milwaukee, said the trials and tribulations he and his family went through helped
forge who they are now.

“I most definitely have a stronger family bond post-injury,” Lee said. “The mere fact that they support what I do now is a huge testament to what a family bond can be. This was something that can easily break a family, yet they decided to just jump on the train and take on the hardship with me. It is really great.”

His two children—Leah, 20, and Jonathan, 17—have been avid volunteers at VA hospitals since each was 14, and both have been awarded the Jesse Brown Memorial Youth Scholarship through their volunteer work.

“There is a lot of meaning behind them volunteering at the VA as opposed to someplace else,” said Lee. “For me, that means they have a lot of respect for me. If not, they would just stay away. The fact that they want to be associated with veterans means quite a bit to me.”

“I think my husband has really instilled service in our family,” said Kate. “Our kids also know it has become their life as well. Many of our weekends are spent following him around.”

Despite his injuries and the constant pain in his lower extremities, Lee speaks with gratitude about his time in the Army.

“I got a lot more from the Guard than I put into it,” he said. “I joined the military with my eyes wide open. I volunteered to join. I have no regrets.”