

Lead Left Interview – Zachary Iscol (Part 2)

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This week we continue our conversation with Zachary Iscol, founder and CEO of Hirepurpose, an organization developed by veterans for veterans to assist in the transition from military to civilian careers. Zach is a combat decorated Marine Officer and Iraq veteran. He is also the Executive Director of the Headstrong Project, a non-profit organization that provides cost-free and bureaucracy-free mental health care treatment to Iraq and Afghanistan veterans.

Second of two parts – [View part one](#)

***The Lead Left:** Zach, I'd like to ask you about your other venture, the Headstrong Foundation.*

Zachary Iscol: Once again, Kayne Anderson was a big supporter. All Rabil and Dave Petrucco are Founding Board Members of The Headstrong Project, a non-profit organization dedicated to providing cost-free, stigma-free and bureaucracy-free mental healthcare for military veterans.

***TLL:** What are the issues affecting veterans? PTSD is one of most publicized, certainly.*

ZI: The transition from the military is tough. Vets lose their sense of community and purpose. There's also the concept of "moral injury." That's when the inevitable horrors of war inflict severe emotional trauma. These men and women are an impressive population. They hold themselves to higher standards. This is part of their survival skills. But the flip side is that this group is not as comfortable with failure.

***TLL:** Who provides the actual healthcare?*

ZI: We've formed a partnership with Weill Cornell Medical Center. Dr. Ann Beeder, a professor of medicine there, has thirty years of experience with psychiatric treatment programs in both trauma and substance abuse. She's helped us develop protocols that have been hugely successful. And with no bureaucracy.

***TLL:** What does that actually mean?*

ZI: When it comes to veterans' mental health issues, the biggest issue to successful outcomes is barriers to care. Our team works with patients to set goals and prescribe treatments. But there's no panacea. PTSD, for example, has different causes. Individual care is critical. Our doctors are trained in various modalities. We can provide that.

***TLL:** What is the cost to the patient?*

ZI: It's a free service, with private funding. We've raised \$850k over the past two years. The physicians at Weill Cornell are salaried professionals who donate their time.

TLL: *How do you scale that treatment?*

ZI: We have a grander goal: to establish a center, have physicians receive certification, then return to their communities and practice what they've learned. Showing proven outcomes will help start a pilot program.

TLL: *What are statistics on suicides in the military? Are vets higher at risk than the general population?*

ZI: Twenty-two veterans commit suicide every day. They are over-represented in suicides. There are a variety of risk factors and causes, but guns and age are both big factors. Of the 30k deaths by guns in the US, 20k are suicides! Gun and vets are a tough combination.

TLL: *What age category is most at risk?*

ZI: White males over fifty are the highest risk group. Think about what that means in terms of mental health expenditures. Put another way, guess which was the most expensive year for WWII vets?

TLL: *Sometime in the 1950's?*

ZI: Actually it was in the early 1980's. That was when those vets hit their 50's and 60's. Which means we haven't even gotten to the most expensive year for Vietnam era vets, let alone those from the more recent conflicts.

TLL: *It has to be tough for the Iraq and Afghan vets. Those wars have lasted three times as long as WWII.*

ZI: Unfortunately there have been more constant deployments since the Civil War. That has led to multiple traumatic experiences.

TLL: *What's the scope of the problem? How many people are we talking about?*

ZI: There are 26 million vets in this country. Most are older. We need to get ahead of the curve.

TLL: *How many patients are in treatment with your program currently?*

ZI: We currently have three dozen in treatment and have treated close to twice that over the past 18 months. The program has been underway long enough to see symptoms improve. It's successful because it gives patients a framework to follow. It helps structure their lives.

TLL: *Zach, tell our readers about the special benefit you have coming up in October.*

ZI: On Wednesday, October 1, at the Tribeca 360 in Manhattan, the Headstrong Project is holding our second *Words of War* benefit. It's a special evening in support of these veterans. There will be performances by Anthony Edwards, Lily Taylor, and Jake Gyllenhaal. We want to get the word out to as many people as possible.

TLL: *Here's a link for anyone interested in tickets or tables: <http://getheadstrong.org/join-us-for-the-words-of-war-benefit-on-october-1-2014/>.*

ZI: Thank you very much for the chance to talk about this.

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