Veteran Voices Newsletter

Episode 51 • August 24, 2026

“... this is the first race that I had finished after the military. Across the line, my mom is there and I'm like ugly sobbing and she's like, oh crap, you know, what did Jonathan do? Like, I just looked at her and I was like, mom, I did it.” - Jonathan Milkovich.

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TL;DR

After being told he might never run again, Army veteran Jonathan Milkovich used fitness, community, and a renewed sense of purpose to overcome grief, isolation, and mental health struggles. He founded Operation Warrior Fit to help veterans, service members, and first responders access races and supportive fitness communities. His planned 700-mile run across North Carolina carries a powerful message: rebuilding your life begins with one step, and no one should have to take it alone.

Why This Army Veteran Is Running Across North Carolina

How Jonathan Milkovich Is Helping Veterans Rebuild



Episode 51 Thumbnail Image

The VA told Jonathan Milkovich he wouldn't be able to run again, and for a while he believed it. That belief collided with the reality many veterans face after military service: injuries, disrupted identity, lost community, and a quiet slide into survival mode. On Veteran Voices, Jonathan explains how the transition to civilian life can shrink your world from a tight unit to a handful of contacts, leaving you without the built-in support network that once made hard days feel manageable. His story connects veteran mental health to something practical and measurable: movement, training, and a purpose you can put on a calendar.

A pivotal part of Jonathan's journey is grief, especially after losing a buddy during COVID when isolation and distance made warning signs harder to read. He describes how staying busy can look like strength while quietly delaying the emotional work that eventually demands attention. When drinking stopped being "just the weekend" and started feeding circular thoughts, panic attacks, and sleepless nights, his wife stepped in with a clear ultimatum: get help and change course, or lose what matters most. That moment reframed mental health stigma into a simpler truth for veterans and first responders: it is okay to not be okay, and it is brave to act on it.

From there, fitness became both a reset button and a bridge back to connection. Jonathan and his wife began training for races, and he describes the emotional shock of crossing a finish line for the first time after service, realizing his body and mind were not “done.” Running and strength work gave him space to process, lowered reactivity, and rebuilt confidence through consistency. The episode emphasizes that you do not need to be an elite athlete to benefit from an active lifestyle. The win can be walking a 12K, completing a first 5K, or simply showing up to a run club where people learn your name and notice when you’re not okay.

That philosophy became **Operation Warrior Fit**, a fitness nonprofit designed to remove barriers that stop veterans, active duty, National Guard, and first responders from joining endurance events and community-based fitness. Race entry fees can run from $30 local 5Ks to $150-$300 marathons, before travel, shoes, and nutrition, so OWF partners with race directors and fitness organizations to provide access, including waiving the small commitment fee when it is a true barrier. Beyond affordability, OWF aims to build local support networks through clubs and groups, with a culture that refuses to shame beginners. Jonathan also talks transparency, documenting finances, publishing updates, and planning a scholarship fund and waitlist system as demand grows. His 700-mile run across North Carolina is both a fundraiser and a signal: you can rebuild, one step at a time, and bring others with you.

Operation Warrior Fit: https://www.operationwarriorfit.org

You can watch the podcast here: https://veteranvoices.us/episode-51-youtube
You can listen on BuzzSprout here: https://veteranvoices.us/episode-51-buzzsprout

Do You Have Something to Share?

As always, if you have resources or a story to share, please write to us at SITREP@VeteranVoices.us or our physical address at the end of this newsletter.

Thank you for reading!

Veteran Voices: Mission

To empower veterans to thrive in civilian life by providing critical resources and support and preventing homelessness through proactive intervention.

We're committed to honoring our heroes' service by ensuring their successful transition, one veteran at a time

Veteran homelessness is a significant issue that is challenging to solve because of the many emotional and psychological factors that contribute to it. We believe that the best approach is to identify and provide resources that assist veterans in making a smooth transition into civilian life. This will help to prevent veterans from becoming homeless in the first place, following the old adage that "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

How You Can Help

If you have resources available to help veterans or have a story of your own to share, we'd love to hear from you! You can contact us at SITREP@VeteranVoices.us.

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A Service of Pearl Lane, LLC
12128 N Division St #1520
Spokane, WA, 99218

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www.VeteranVoices.us
podcast.VeteranVoices.us
SITREP@VeteranVoices.us

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