



Jake Wood, Team Rubicon CEO on veterans finding purpose in helping others

[Transcript](#)

Michael Kearney:

Hey, everybody. We have taken a bit of a hiatus as you probably have noticed. And you know what the best part of taking a bit of time off is? Getting all of the messages from many folks over social media about the fact that they've actually missed Resilient. And I've gotten a lot of questions like, when are you going to do another podcast? So here we are today. And we are really back with a special conversation. And before I introduce our guest, let me just share a quick story.

So I'm going to go back to October 9. Middle of the night. It was a Monday. And my cousin, who lives in Santa Rosa, heard a frantic knocking on her door. And she and her husband were lying in bed, as most people would be doing at 2:00 in the morning. And she's a 911 dispatcher. Her husband's a local policeman. And they heard this knocking on their door. Bang, banh, bang. And you know how it is when you hear a knocking sound in the middle of the night. You're like, what is that? And it just kept getting louder and louder and louder. And they quickly realized that they had to get up and go figure out what was going on.

So they got to their door and they opened the door and they heard their neighbor screaming, "get out of your house!" And they quickly realized that there was smoke coming into their house and there was fire that was enveloping their neighborhood. And so they ran upstairs and they grabbed their two daughters. Two beautiful daughters. And they literally just grabbed them and ran to their car. They took absolutely nothing—so basically the clothes that were on their back—and they ran out the door and sped away.

I remember them saying that they could barely see the signs on the freeway when they were getting on the freeway. They could barely see anything because the smoke was so bad. And, like I indicated, their house was in Santa Rosa. And they came back the next day and basically all they saw was rubble.

And this really came full circle yesterday. I had the opportunity to tour the Santa Rosa, Sonoma, Napa areas with a group of local leaders. And we were basically looking at all the devastation, the people that were impacted by the fires. And what really stood out was the community in Santa Rosa where my cousin lived. And it's really hard to express the devastation. It's hard to express it in words. And if you could almost just picture a very close-knit community of hundreds of houses. And they literally were all gone. Pretty much as far as you could see, houses were gone and it was rubble. You saw burned cars. No tires on the rims. So you could just think about how hot it was and how fast the fire enveloped that area.

And what's interesting, this was more than two weeks after the fire and you could still smell the stench in the area. And I remember driving out of Santa Rosa last night and I took a picture of people that are now camping out under the freeways because they lost their houses. There's nowhere else for them to stay right now.

And the one thing though that was kind of the positive takeaway was all the signs plastered everywhere in the county. Signs thanking the first responders, the firefighters, the local policemen, all the volunteers, near and far. And today I am really fired up to be speaking with Jake Wood, the CEO of Team Rubicon. And we just found out this morning that there are a few hundred Team Rubicon volunteers that are in this area. But Team Rubicon essentially deploys veterans into natural disasters to help people in their darkest hour. And I will tell you, just observing this area, this was—although hopeful now—the darkest hour for many. I am really looking forward to my conversation with Jake. And what's interesting is Team Rubicon deploys people to help folks that are in these natural disasters. But what I think is incredible about the mission, the purpose of Team Rubicon, is not only helping people in need, the folks that have been impacted by those disasters, but also helping the veterans who have come back from war and need to find purpose again. And I think the veterans themselves have found purpose by being deployed to these natural disasters.

Jake Wood:

One of our favorite words around here is grit. Just the ability to clench your teeth and move forward. We've always valued grit and tenacity. When I think of resilience I think about—you know life's going to punch you in the face. It always will. It's punched me in the face numerous times. Mostly figuratively. Sometimes literally. And you just can't flinch. You just have to take it. You have to get yourself up. You have to dust yourself off. And you have to keep walking forward

Welcome to Resilient, where we feature stories from leaders on crisis, risk, and disruption. And when I talk about leaders, I'm talking about CEOs, board members, and other leaders outside of the business world. And that's what we're doing today. And the reason why—I've thought about this a lot. The reason why I started Resilient was to talk to these leaders, but really to get their stories. And I think the power of story is incredible because it's what allows us to really understand what these leaders went through, what they thought at the time. But then, most importantly, the lessons that we all can collectively take away. Whether you're a business leader, whether you're a student, whether you're not even in the business world, there are nuggets in here that every one of us could take away.

My name is Mike Kearney. I'm a partner in Deloitte's Strategic Risk Practice. And I really have the coolest job. I moonlight with this Resilient podcast, but I have some other interesting things that I do within Deloitte. I serve clients obviously. I lead our brand and reputation venture fund. And then I'm creating these new experiences to bring our solutions to our clients and our technologies in a very experimental way. So I couldn't ask for a better job.

But really the purpose of today is not to talk about me, it's to talk with Jake. And specifically what compelled him to move from his dream of being an NFL lineman to joining the Marines. And then really coming out of the military and finding purpose again with Team Rubicon. I'm really interested in talking to him about how Team Rubicon's mission has evolved and what plans he has for the organization in the future.

Hey, we're sitting here with Jake Wood, the CEO and founder of Team Rubicon. You know, I wanted to start with a question about Pat Tillman. So he's actually a personal hero. If I showed you my computer, you'd see I have a sticker on there. I did the New York Marathon for Team Tillman. Raised a bunch of money. He's one of my heroes. But I know that he was an inspiration to you really when you were kind of at that point in your life where you're thinking of the NFL but you

ended up going into the Marines. So can you share a bit about that? Like what inspired you to do that, and how did he play into that?

Jake Wood: Yeah, well, I mean it wasn't—by the time I was making that decision it wasn't the NFL or the Marine Corps. You know my talent had made that decision for me, or lack thereof. I was a freshman in college at University of Wisconsin on 9/11, and joining the military had always been something I'd thought about, had been interested in.

Michael Kearney: Do you have family in the military or just?

Jake Wood: My grandparents served in the military. Like just about everybody's did during World War II. But I wouldn't say I came from a military family. But it always interested me. So my freshman year, I sat there and—I think like most young men and women, or at least the ones I knew—thought about joining up kind of in that surge after 9/11. I watched as Pat Tillman did. And as a football player, that resonated with me. But I didn't kind of have that same conviction that he did. And so watched the country go to war over the next couple years. And then my senior year, right before my senior year, Pat Tillman was killed in Afghanistan. And I just—it was kind of a moment of reckoning for me where I had to look in the mirror and think about what type of person I wanted to be. You know, if I wanted to be that person of conviction, that man of conviction that he was. How I remember, that's the moment I made the decision to join.

Michael Kearney: But it was building up to that for three years it sounds like—

Jake Wood: You know it had been bouncing around in my head. I was playing ball, I was wanting to make it to the NFL. That wasn't going to play out. So I had to make a choice about what I was going to do after I got done. And it was either go into banking or go into the Marine Corps.

Michael Kearney: Right on.

Jake Wood: I guess Uncle Sam called.

Michael Kearney: So let me ask you. The one thing that I personally like about Pat Tillman's story is he's almost a paradox because while he joined the Army at that time, when he was in—he was fine with going to Afghanistan. But when he went to Iraq I think he really was like, I'm not sure if I believe in what we're doing. So he was kind of a paradox, like I said. Did any of that kind of challenge of logic play into that at all for you or?

Jake Wood: I mean Pat Tillman, from everything I've read, was certainly his own man. You know he—I don't think he was a blind patriot. Despite being an amazing patriot. I think he had the wherewithal to think clearly and question what we were doing.

Michael Kearney: Yep.

Jake Wood: If you read any of his biographies, you'll see that come through. He was always a bit of a contrarian.

Michael Kearney: Right.

Jake Wood: Which I think is kind of a part of his legacy.

Michael Kearney: Absolutely. So I always love talking about the youth. Because I actually think that who we ultimately are is shaped by our early childhood experience. So is there anything that you could point back to, you know when you were growing up, that had an impact on your value system?

Jake Wood: I grew up in a great family—a nuclear family. My mother and father loved one another. My dad had a great job. Wonderful sister. So I was set up for success early on. If I have to reflect back and think about what kind of formed me—I grew up in a Lutheran household. I would go to church every Sunday. I think that had an impact on my value system. You know, it helped me shape a way of thinking of the world. But one moment, kind of a seminal moment in my childhood, when I was young I was living in Europe. My dad got transferred out there for his job. We were living in Austria. It was 1989. It was kind of the height of the Cold War. A really interesting time to be out there.

But one weekend my parents took my sisters and me to a former Nazi concentration camp. Which was a museum. I think that was—you know when you're young, like your notion of evil is kind of shaped by Sunday school stories or maybe like some cheesy villain in a cartoon. And—

Michael Kearney: The Rambo movies or—

Jake Wood: Well, I mean not even. I mean I'm talking like seven years old. It's like the Duck Tales and Ninja Turtles. A rhinoceros in a suit of armor is your villain. And you go to a concentration camp and your eyes are completely opened up to what evil is. And that was pretty formative for me. Just seeing man's capacity for hate and evil. But also kind of the last exhibit of the concentration camp was the liberation. And you get to see the best. You know, people who left their families at home to fight off in foreign lands for people. And that was really what had led me to think about joining the military for most of my young adult life.

Michael Kearney: So who did you look up to when you were younger? Any heroes that you could point to? Not necessarily sports but anybody. It could be parents, sports—

Jake Wood: Yeah, my dad was always a hero for me. You know he was a really smart guy. He worked harder than anybody I knew. He was a great father. He taught me a lot about the type of person I needed to be. You know, I read a lot of books. And so I'd count among my heroes the people most would call—like the Lincolns and the Eisenhowers. The Washingtons. And then it was sports, you know for me. It was the Atlanta Braves in the 90s. I was a TBS-era Braves fan. And you know Michael Jordan and the Bulls and all those guys.

Michael Kearney: So what made you go into football? What drew you to it?

Jake Wood: Well, I threw like I had two left hands. I couldn't hit a free throw. And I hit a growth spurt and found myself 6'6", 240 pounds my sophomore year in high school. You know that's kind of destined to be—

[Cross Talk]

Yeah. My dad was a big football player. He played briefly at Ohio State. Played some amateur leagues for a while in his 20s. And so that obviously had a bunch of influence on—

Michael Kearney: And so at Wisconsin, that's like offensive line university, right?

Jake Wood: Yeah. You know it was crazy. After my junior year I started getting recruited. Initially the state schools started calling. And then Illinois. So eventually a bunch of schools started calling. I never thought about Wisconsin as an option. I grew up—

Michael Kearney: Where were you living at the time? I don't even know where you grew up.

Jake Wood: So I was living in Iowa.

Michael Kearney: You were living in Iowa.

Jake Wood: But I had been born in Nebraska. My mom was a Nebraska alum. So I grew up a Nebraska fan. And in the 90s that was an easy team to love. I mean three national championships while I was growing up in the 90s. And Nebraska came calling. That was a dream come true.

But I went up to Madison. Obviously it's offensive line university. That's what I was playing. I thought I wanted to play in the NFL. I mean who doesn't when they're getting recruited. And so it kind of came down to two different schools. It was Stanford or it was Wisconsin.

Michael Kearney: Yep.

Jake Wood: And I got into Stanford and I went out there. That was the first official trip that I took, you know where they pay to bring you out and all that stuff.

Michael Kearney: Yeah, yeah.

Jake Wood: And that campus is just—

Michael Kearney: Unbelievable. Yeah.

Jake Wood: You can't even describe how beautiful is. And coming from Iowa this is February. So I leave Iowa —

Michael Kearney: Sixty-five, 70 degrees—

Jake Wood: Yeah. It's 15 degrees in Iowa when I leave. I land, it's 75 and sunny in California. They're showing me around. And they'd just come off a Rose Bowl appearance. So they had a decent program at the time. And then I go up to Madison. And you know, it's funny because the offensive line coach there was just a no-nonsense guy. Tough as shit. And whereas Stanford would kind of shower me with praise, the offensive line coach at Wisconsin's like, "all right, I want you to play here but I'm not going to beg you. So either sign or we'll find somebody else." And I was just like, that's who I want to play for. You know like this is a no—

Michael Kearney: It's like dating a girl, man. It's like, oh, yeah, I kind of want to date you but that's—

Jake Wood: It was wild. But I knew if I went to Wisconsin that I'd be going against the toughest competition. Because they were only going to bring in the best guys. And I knew that if I competed and earned a starting spot that the chance of playing in the NFL was near 100 percent. But I also knew that, hey, there's going to be another Jake Wood that's going to come in the next year. It turns out they didn't recruit another Jake Wood. They recruited a guy named Joe Thomas.

Michael Kearney: I was wondering because you have his jersey in your hallway so.

Jake Wood: Yeah. So Joe's two years younger than me. He came in to UW and basically that was the end of my career. Going back to why the Marine Corps.

Michael Kearney: Well, that's a good person, man. Like if you think about who took your spot.

Jake Wood: Yeah. I'm not ashamed of it. It's not like I lost my spot to some schmuck. You know, he's the best that's ever played the game. So I'm not saying that if he hadn't come in that I would have made the NFL. Hell, I might not have even started. But at least I have an excuse, right?

Michael Kearney: Right, right. So going back to your time in the Marines. I've got an 18-year-old son and it's that pivotal moment where he's going to school. And we've talked about him going into the Marines or military. What's your perspective on that now? Like what do you tell kids that are in high school or considering a military career about how it impacted you, whether it makes sense or not?

Jake Wood: I think the military—you know my wife and I argue about this all the time. Like it's tough, right. And it's hard on you. And if you're lucky enough that you can serve and never have to go to war, it's probably the best thing that you can do to get all those things that people always talk about. The discipline. The integrity. All these things that it can instill in you. Leadership. It is, I think, one of the noblest callings that kind of remain professionally in our society. I think it's ultimately one of the highest civic duties that you can fulfill.

Michael Kearney: Yep.

Jake Wood: So I think it helps us make good citizens and stronger communities. But it'll wear you down. If you are called upon to go to war, like that's obviously what you're signing up for and that's what the nation needs. You should be proud of that service. But you know war changes people. Obviously you can get wounded or killed. And I had plenty of friends who were both wounded and/or killed. You just have to come to terms with that. And you have to kind of walk in to that decision eyes wide open to that reality. At the end of the day, we're an all-volunteer force. We need people who are willing to look at that decision and say, yeah, that's what I'm willing to sign up for.

Michael Kearney: So we're not going to go into your military career in that much depth, but you were both in Iraq and Afghanistan, is that right?

Jake Wood: Yep.

Michael Kearney: What was it like coming back? The question I was going to ask was what was missing. And that's presumptuous. But what was it like coming back?

Jake Wood: You know it's hard to even remember, honestly. I came back from Iraq almost 10 years ago to the day. I was there in 2007 during the surge. It was a nasty time. I think I came back feeling like I was invincible. We got beat up while we were there. We lost a bunch of guys. A bunch of guys got hurt. I came home and, you know, I was unscathed and I kind of felt like, hey, I'm bullet proof, man. And kind of acted that way. Went to sniper school. A few months after that I went to Afghanistan and same thing. Just a really bloody tour. Came back. I guess what I was wrestling with was—you know I got back from Afghanistan. I'd spent basically the last two years of my life in war. And had grown accustomed to it. And so I was introspective enough to kind of pause and reflect and realize that it was becoming a little normal for me and I didn't really like that. If I really thought about it, a lot of my friends were signing up for additional tours. They were reenlisting and it was a combination of they'd kind of grown addicted to it and a combination of the mission wasn't done yet. I just sat there and I thought, man, I don't want this to define who I am.

Michael Kearney: Well, I read—and maybe it was in another podcast that you did—but you actually indicated that one of the biggest challenges is that adrenaline rush that you get in war.

Jake Wood: Mm hmm.

Michael Kearney: And quite frankly, people miss it.

Jake Wood: Yeah.

Michael Kearney: And that may sound bad, but it's—I don't want to say fun rolling around like—

Jake Wood: You'll never feel as alive as those moments when you're like literally staring death in the face. And you know, that's why people jump out of airplanes. It's why people drive a motorcycle 150 miles an hour down the Pacific Coast Highway. Those are exhilarating things to do. And combat is probably the pinnacle of that.

Michael Kearney: So yesterday, I said this in my opening, but I toured all of the northern California fire areas. I had a cousin that lost a house. I mean un-freaking—I have never seen anything like that personally.

Jake Wood: Yeah.

Michael Kearney: But what I'm curious about is, can you talk about how you even get into natural disasters in the first place? I know there's quite an interesting back story there, but maybe if you could share that.

Jake Wood: Yeah. I mean, you know not by design. I was going to go to school and be a consultant at Deloitte.

Michael Kearney: And look at you now.

Jake Wood: Yeah. Thank god I didn't get sentenced to that fate. So right before I joined the Marine Corps, I was waiting to get shipped to boot camp. And so I was—you know they actually had a backlog back in the day. So I kept getting delayed. And Hurricane Katrina happened. A buddy of mine from high school called me up. Matt Hall. He said, hey, let's go down to New Orleans and help. I was like, all right.

So I drove and picked him up at Iowa State. He was I think finishing up another semester there. We drove south. And it took us about 24 hours. We got down to the outskirts of New Orleans. You know you couldn't get into New Orleans at the time. It was complete lockdown. So we just went into some areas like Lake Pontchartrain and started helping people. We had a couple chainsaws and stuff. You know I thought that was kind of interesting. Went back. Drank some beer. Shipped off to boot camp and four years later—

Michael Kearney: It was a nice story.

Jake Wood: Yeah. It was a nice story. And four years later it's January 2010. I'd just gotten out of the Marine Corps. I'm sitting around. I'm waiting to go to grad school. And the Haiti earthquake happens. Kind of the same thing. I'm sitting there and I'm like, man, I could—

Michael Kearney: I could actually do something—

Jake Wood: I could actually do something. Unlike when I went down to Katrina when I didn't know shit. You know now I actually feel like I have some training and some skills. So I called a couple of organizations. None of them would take me as a volunteer.

Michael Kearney: So you called them and said, hey, I'd love to go down and help you out and they said, no, we don't need anybody?

Jake Wood: Yeah. I mean that's basically what they said. And listen, at the time I was infuriated. Now I get it. This happened during Harvey. I had 50 people call my cell phone and say, hey, send me to Houston. It's like, no—

Michael Kearney: I saw you speak last week. I—

Jake Wood: That's not how this works. So I get it. But at the time I didn't get it. And so, you know I called a handful of friends. We ended up committing to go. We organized a team. We got down to Haiti four days later or something like that and started working. And just the whole thing snowballed. You know doctors started flying in to join us. Nurses. More vets. And we just realized that everything we'd been taught in the military, you know short of how to shoot, was applicable down there. So we came back and incorporated that and started building it.

Michael Kearney: That's the thing I'm curious about. Because you obviously went through that experience and you said, gosh, I have an idea of something that we could do that's greater than just this one incident. Lots of people have ideas. So how did

you go from like, wow this is a cool thing that we could do, to we could make a career out of it, to something that it is today.

Jake Wood: Well, I mean I don't have any other experience in this, but you know Haiti itself was an impulse, right. It was just, let's go help. You know. And we'll tell it over beers for the rest of our lives about that one time we made this crazy choice to go down to Port au Prince after an earthquake. So we come back from Haiti and we kind of think, this was cool. And we thought of it like a club more than an organization. We just figured we'd have a roster of 200 or 300 guys. Mostly from special operations backgrounds. And some doctors. And when bad stuff happened we'd just—

Michael Kearney: Deploy out.

Jake Wood: Put the bat signal up and we'd go. And we did that in 2010. You know we kind of putzed around with it. We took it seriously, but we weren't thinking in kind of a grander scale. And it was 2011 before we actually—you know I dropped out of grad school. My cofounder moved from DC to LA and we started cranking on it full time. And it's hard to even say what happened, what changed or why. There were things that started to indicate to us that it could be much bigger than we were thinking. But even in 2011, 2012, we never would have imagined the scale that we've gotten to today.

Michael Kearney: Was there ever a time where you were like, god, this just isn't meant to be? Or a roadblock that you had to overcome?

Jake Wood: Yeah, like daily.

Michael Kearney: Daily.

Jake Wood: For the first three years. I mean, being an entrepreneur, especially a social entrepreneur, it's one of those things where you curse life every single day. Like you wake up and you just think about the weight of everything you've got crushing you and all the challenges. And then at night you kind of go to bed and you're like, I wouldn't want to do anything else.

Michael Kearney: See that's the thing that interests me is—I just keep going back to you had an idea. And this one is not even necessarily motivated by money. This is more by purpose.

Jake Wood: No, no, no. In no way motivated by money. My wife will assure you of that.

Michael Kearney: But something kind of pushed you to do that. And it had to have been the cause, or maybe it was the experiences—whether in Haiti or Katrina where you saw the impact that you could make.

Jake Wood: Yeah. I mean, helping people's always been a part of my value system. It's how I was raised. So we had this opportunity to build something that could help people on a massive scale. And I think we found other people that shared that vision for making the world a better place. When you have the opportunity to do that—again, at scale—that's a compelling reason to join.

Michael Kearney: For those people who may not know Team Rubicon or even some of these other groups that do this, bring a real life disaster to life for us. Like what do you guys do? And who do you deploy and what are your people in the field actually doing? And I know we could use Harvey, the fires, any one of these examples.

Jake Wood: So we have two primary buckets that we can think about. We have international operations and domestic operations. Ninety-five percent of the work we do is domestic.

Michael Kearney: Yep.

Jake Wood: So typically what happens, whether it's a fire, a flood, a hurricane, tornado—any of those things rip through and destroy the community physically. And so you have these homeowners that are displaced. They go to a shelter. Typically these shelters are managed by the Red Cross, maybe some faith-based groups. We're the organization that moves in and works with the authorities to actually stabilize the community and the structures. So we go through, we help the communities establish a common operating picture of what the damage looks like. And then we go through and systematically clear debris, open roads, and

help individual property owners stabilize their home so they can get back into them faster. That's essentially what we do domestically.

Now Harvey was a little unique. We ran some boat rescue operations. You know those are rare occurrences where the volume of like a swift water rescue need exceeds the capacity of the professional authorities. But it did in the situation of Harvey. Obviously, it did in Katrina. Maybe happens every couple years on a big scale. So we assisted there.

Internationally, we mostly do remote medical work. So an earthquake happens in Nepal. We go in. We send pretty elite medical teams—mobile medical teams in. And they'll go outside of the main cities into remote outlying villages and communities and deliver sometimes life-saving medical aid, search and rescue capabilities. And with that is kind of a reconnaissance component where they can report back to authorities on the damage that they're encountering. The needs of the population. Things like that. So that aid gets distributed more equitably.

Michael Kearney: So can you connect it back to veterans? Because it almost seems like—and your motto is, “disasters are our business, veterans are our passion.” Which I love. I don't know who wrote that, but that's unbelievably compelling. Can you talk—it almost feels like to me that the disasters are important but it's almost helping veterans engage in something that has purpose. That that's almost as important as helping the disaster victims. Is that right?

Jake Wood: Well, I mean we are a disaster response organization. And just like the motto says, that's our business. And we exist to help people on their worst day. That's kind of what we talk about. And so we build the organization to help those communities in times of crisis. But we know that one of the outcomes that happens is that there's this huge impact on the people that are doing the work. The organization's 80 percent veterans. That's by design. And when we think about the challenges that many, but not all, veterans face when they get out of the military and return to our communities, they have some of these reintegration challenges. And a lot of people focus on the symptoms. It's jobs, it's housing, it's access to health care. I think those are all very important things. But I think the foundation of those issues most typically is a lack of purpose. And that's compounded by a lack of community and a lack of identity. And so we focus on—or we talk about—how do you restore those three things in vets? And if you do that, we believe—you know these are vets who are highly capable, highly trained. If you restore those three things, they're probably going to be

able to go out and get a job. Be a better family person. Take care of their education and their health care. All that stuff.

Michael Kearney: Have you seen—and maybe not any stories necessarily, but have you seen an impact in the veterans that you’ve worked with? Meaning, has it made a tangible difference in their lives?

Jake Wood: Oh, absolutely. We saw it very early. Anecdotally we would have stories of veterans coming back, talking about profound impact in their lives. Where we really knew we were having an impact there before we actually started measuring it quantitatively was you’d have spouses come and say, hey, thanks for giving me my husband back.

Michael Kearney: That’s probably better than any quantitative measure.

Jake Wood: Yeah.

[Cross Talk]

You know you have a spouse come and say, listen, I didn’t even know who my husband was anymore. And now there’s that spark inside of him again. That’s the person that I loved and married. And that’s pretty powerful when you hear that.

Michael Kearney: And hopefully you’re okay talking about this, but I know that your best friend, Clay Hunt, was an integral part of Team Rubicon. And he took his life in 2011. And I read that that actually impacted kind of the direction of the organization. Hopefully I’ve got that right. But can you talk about that?

Jake Wood: Yes. So Clay taking his own life back in 2011 was one of those—it was kind of the straw that broke the camel’s back that led to William and I really committing to building this full-time. It was kind of at that point where we were either going to just be some diddly hobby organization or actually do—

Michael Kearney: Make something of it.

Jake Wood: Make something of it. You know, Clay's death I think revealed to me the power that this could have on veterans. Clay was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress. But I do truly think that it was a lack of purpose that led him to ultimately pull the trigger. He just didn't see a life of meaning anymore. And he was always a guy that was searching for meaning. Yeah. I mean at the time we were really struggling with is TR a disaster response organization or is it a veterans organization? And we kind of waffled on that back and forth before really saying, listen, we are a disaster response organization. And the way we talk about it is, veterans aren't the object of our charity. They're the agent of the change we're making. So I think that's a really important distinction because everything we talk about is, hey, Joe Veteran, you have something yet to give.

Michael Kearney: Right.

Jake Wood: You have value. You have skills. We're going to use them. Oh, by the way, you're going to get something out of it. And just kind of realigning that messaging I think really resonates with those veterans who are searching for something, whether or not they know it. And a lot of people don't even know it.

Michael Kearney: They don't even know it. So one of the things I loved, although it feels like you've made a little pivot so I'm curious, but I think in the early days you guys were known for breaking the rules. Like not necessarily playing by the rules when—

Jake Wood: Ah, stretching rules. You know. Breaking, stretching. What's the difference, right?

Michael Kearney: And once again, thinking of this as a startup, which it feels like a startup here. This is one of the coolest places I've been. But I think in order for startups to grow and make an impact, you do have to break rules. But it feels like you guys have kind of, and I don't want to say come back in the mainstream, but you're playing by rules maybe more than you used to. How do you as a leader—because you feel like the type of guy that's like, I want to break the rules. I want to do what's right. How do you manage through that? Because I would think

that you probably could get a lot of people excited about working for the organization where it's like, screw it, we're not going to play by the rules that have been set up. We're going to do things that actually impact the community that we're trying to serve. But obviously as you're trying to grow and evolve as an organization, you do need to play more by the rules. How do you—

Jake Wood: Yeah. I mean it's a balance. I think if you want to have long-term enduring impact, you have to play well with others. We know that. And many of the rules exist for good reason. And once we begin better understanding the rules and the framework, we understood the why. And we were able to operate within that framework in a way that I think maximized its efficiency.

Michael Kearney: Right.

Jake Wood: Now I think what we still try to do is challenge norms. Which are a little bit different than rules, right? Norms are the way things have always been done. And I think those are meant to be challenged. In any industry or any sector, right?

Michael Kearney: Any good examples of things that you'd say—a longstanding norm that's been out there we've been able to kind of buck the trend.

Jake Wood: I'll give you a good example. And this one caused some heartburn. So with Harvey, you know we quickly saw, like everybody else did, that this was going to be an event that exceeded the capacity of just about every organization and agency that was going to respond. So we knew that we were going to have to bring in volunteers from across the country. And obviously that poses logistical challenges and all that.

Michael Kearney: Sure.

Jake Wood: We've got a good relationship with the military. We actually have a one-to-one relationship with the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff. So we say, hell, let's ask General Joe Dunford if he will make military airlift available for Team Rubicon volunteers out of these 10 cities across the US. Email General Dunford. He gets back to me immediately. He says, Jake, I don't know if this is possible, but if it's possible we'll do it. And by possible he meant like legal.

Michael Kearney: Right. Like somebody could fly you from these 10 cities—

Jake Wood: So that set some wheels in motion. And what we learned was that this is possible. But the request has to be routed through FEMA. And FEMA was understandably annoyed that this conversation was happening without them at the table. And I get that. And we were very apologetic and it was an ignorance on our part.

Now what happened was, FEMA comes back and they say, well, we've never done this before. We've never requested military airlift for volunteer organizations. We said, well, don't you think you should? Don't we think that—you know this is a norm that you're saying we've never done this before. We're sitting there and we're saying, 100,000 structures have been damaged or destroyed. You need volunteer organizations on the ground to help these communities.

Michael Kearney: Yeah. ASAP.

Jake Wood: Now it didn't happen. We ended up not getting that military airlift. I think though we've now put the wheels in motion for FEMA to really think about this as a new normal. To request space available on some of these military flights to get agencies like ours on the ground faster and en masse when necessary.

Michael Kearney: Yeah. In many respects one of these things that you're doing is you're asking questions that may never have been asked before. And even though you didn't get the answer immediately, maybe it changes the way things are done in the future. Which is great.

Jake Wood: Yeah. I mean it was a moonshot. It's like, hey, let's email Joe Dunford and ask him for C130s. You have to be kind of foolish enough to think that and then to act on it. You know one of the things we've always said, it's still at the top of every job description we post, is we're looking for people foolish enough to change the world. Or foolish enough to think they can change the world, smart enough to have a chance. So we look for a little bit of that foolishness in people just to think big and take chances and—

Michael Kearney: We need to start posting our Deloitte positions saying that type of stuff. That's inspirational. So one of the things—and this is kind of a weird question coming now giving the fact that it's been a series of natural disasters. But how do you keep your volunteers, which are like 50-plus thousand.

Jake Wood: Sixty-five thousand. Yeah.

Michael Kearney: Jesus. How do you keep them motivated and engaged when there's not a lot of natural disasters? So if you go back a year or two ago. What do you do to motivate them?

Jake Wood: I mean, first of all, it's important to understand that there are disasters happening every day in this country across communities all over the US. We'll respond to 70 this year. The average citizen could probably only think of two or three that happened.

Michael Kearney: I was blown away. You have a map.

Jake Wood: Yeah.

Michael Kearney: Actually I took a picture of it. Hopefully it's okay for us to post it. But I think I counted only two states that you guys have not responded in. I don't know if that's right or not, but it looked—

Jake Wood: And it's not because there haven't been disasters in those states. It's because we just haven't gotten to them. So there's—think about floods. You know, the Mississippi River floods every two years. And it's not like a flood that impacts a community. When the Mississippi River floods, 10 states are impacted. You know hundreds and hundreds of communities all along those riverbanks. So you could think about that as a flood or you can think about that as there were 100 communities that were impacted. So that means that there are 10 states from which TR volunteers can mobilize and deploy and have impact.

So if we can kind of accept that there are hundreds of disasters in the US and we're not even responding to half of them yet. You know we keep our

volunteers motivated and engaged through training. We really try to adopt that similar military mindset. One of the guys on our team has this saying: When you rest, you rust. And so you constantly have to train to stay sharp and avoid the rust.

Michael Kearney: One of the—I think I read this. And if I didn't, correct me if I'm wrong. But I think you said, "I was volunteer number one." So I get this. Is there any disaster or any story that stands out above them all? That just is like, oh man, this is where I knew I could make an impact.

Jake Wood: I mean there—Haiti was I think as bad a disaster as I hope I ever see in my lifetime. That country, that earthquake, the combination of those two, there was so much suffering. And so we saw there the ability to literally save lives. We were saving lives, delivering babies. I mean it was insane. But every disaster has that on some level. You know somebody's life is destroyed in each and every one of these situations. And if you really just boil any one of them down to that one homeowner, that one citizen who had their entire life upturned, they're all different, they're all unique, but that element remains the same. This person has suffered their worst day. And what can we do to help them?

Michael Kearney: Do you ever keep in touch with any of these people? I know that sounds random. But like from Haiti, have you ever seen or connected with any of them since you've been down there or any of the other disasters?

Jake Wood: You know I'm friends with a couple of our interpreters on Facebook. I haven't been to Haiti since I was down there initially. You know Team Rubicon's returned a couple times for different reasons. But I, myself, haven't gone. And I'd like to. I mean I try not to get too emotionally tied up in those things. We all kind of have our individual capacity for emotion. And it would quickly fill up if I was trying to stay in touch with all of these homeowners and even the volunteers as well. You know I wouldn't even have any capacity for my wife. And so you have to watch out for getting too tied up in some of that.

Michael Kearney: What about plans to take Team Rubicon to the next level? When you look at Team Rubicon in five to ten years, is there anything that stands out? Anything that you really want to do?

Jake Wood: Well, we want to do it all. We talk about kind of weaving Team Rubicon into the fabric of America. Making it an expectation for service members to join it when they leave the military. Making it an expectation that communities turn to us when they are in crisis. You know we're usually pretty boring when I get asked that question because I just say we're going to do more and we're going to do it better.

Michael Kearney: Do more of what we're doing. Yeah.

Jake Wood: Yeah.

Michael Kearney: I want to pivot to leadership. So you've probably worked with some incredible people. Is there anybody that stands out that you'd like to identify and maybe what they taught you?

Jake Wood: You know, I was fortunate in the Marine Corps to be surrounded by good leaders. So the Marines I served with were the best Marines I ever met. They taught me a lot. They taught me a lot about accountability. They taught me a lot about selflessness. They taught me a lot about, you know, love. I mean one of the things I learned early on is when you're leading people, and particularly in combat, you better love the people that you're with.

Michael Kearney: Yeah.

Jake Wood: And what that means is they can't just be a Marine. They have to be your Marine. You have to know who they are, where they came from, where they want to go in life. Because, at the end of the day when you're waking up and you're about to go out on that two hundredth patrol and you have to convince them in the middle of the night to put their boots back on and put their flap jacket back on and walk out, you know for another counterinsurgency patrol, you can't just tell them to do it. You have to understand what the motivation is going to be for them. So, after 200 of them, the motivation starts to wane.

Michael Kearney: One of the things I've learned in talking with—I've interviewed a lot of military veterans. It's unbeknownst to many of us, but you can't tell them what to do. You have to earn their respect.

Jake Wood: Yeah.

Michael Kearney: I don't know if you saw that.

Jake Wood: I mean—

[Cross Talk]

Yeah. You can lead with rank or you can lead with respect. And at the end of the day, yes you can tell them what to do. And if you outrank them they will do it. But they're not going to do it very well. And they're not going to follow you enthusiastically. And if you can get people to follow you enthusiastically, you know you're going to win. You know that enthusiastic execution will overcome bad tactics—

Michael Kearney: Every time.

Jake Wood: You know the term in the Marine Corps, I don't use it as often around here because it doesn't translate that well, is violence of action. Any bad idea violently executed has a pretty good chance of success.

Michael Kearney: I think I'm going to take that one. That's a good one. I'm going to adopt that at Deloitte.

Jake Wood: Violence of action.

Michael Kearney: What about the toughest decision you've ever had to make? In anything.

Jake Wood: Whoo, man. Toughest decision. I think the toughest decision usually centers around people. Being a first-time entrepreneur, you didn't learn a whole lot about management at my level in the Marine Corps. So I didn't really have any management skills coming into this. This is the first real job I've ever had, you know. So learning how to manage people outside the norms of the military was challenging. And so some of the hardest decisions I've had to make are around people. And it gets compounded in a job like this where they're here for more than money. So you're not just cutting people from their economic means. You're cutting them from a job that they're truly passionate about.

Michael Kearney: So you mean like if somebody just wasn't doing what they needed to do—

Jake Wood: Yeah, letting people go.

Michael Kearney: Letting people go.

Jake Wood: Yeah. It's a tough lesson to learn for young leaders. It was tough for me. And it's particularly problematic here just because even for the people we've had to let go, most of them—maybe not all but most of them—were so passionate about the organization. It's hard to let anybody go because you're cutting off their economic means of living. Whether they have a family or not. But when you cut that and you're effectively severing them from something that they truly love, that's tough. It's really hard.

Michael Kearney: Wow. So we named this podcast Resilient. And I would imagine you, of anybody that we've had on just because of your military days and then also all the recovery efforts, have seen resilient people. What do you think of when you hear that word? Like what terms or what attributes come to mind?

Jake Wood: One of our favorite words around here is grit. Just the ability to clench your teeth and move forward. We've always valued grit and tenacity. When I think of resilience I think about—you know life's going to punch you in the face. It always will. It's punched me in the face numerous times. Mostly figuratively. Sometimes literally. And you just can't flinch. You just have to take it. You have to get yourself up. You have to dust yourself off. And you have to keep walking forward and grit your teeth. Or clench your jaw and—

Michael Kearney: You know what's interesting? Grit—I forgot who wrote this article. But it is the number one determinant of a kid's success.

Jake Wood: Yeah. I read that too. And I thought it was really fascinating.

Michael Kearney: Because everybody's like, oh no, it's grades or what school you go to. It's your ability to kind of persevere and clench your teeth like you said.

Jake Wood: Yeah. You know what? Like tighten up that jaw and just walk forward into that uncertainty. Walk through the adversity. You know it's interesting—recently I've seen some people who lacked that. And it actually just shocked me.

Michael Kearney: Shocked you that they lacked it?

Jake Wood: Shocked me—

Jake Wood: I saw people kind of buckle under the weight of life. And what was happening, the life that they were experiencing was kind of like, it's life.

Michael Kearney: Too much for them. Yeah.

Jake Wood: Yeah. It was a sad circumstance. I had empathy. You know like, hey, that sucks. Life punched you in the face. Why are you crumpling like a paper tiger right now? Get up. Dust yourself off. Come back to work.

Michael Kearney: Right on, right on. Well, Jake, thank you very much. This was awesome.

Jake Wood: Yeah, thanks for having me. It was fun.

Michael Kearney: Cool.

What an incredible conversation. Jake, if you're listening, thank you very much. I can't tell you how awesome it is for me to sit here with leaders and ask them any question that I want. And really, when I prepare for these, the way that I think about it is, I ask questions that I am super curious about. And hopefully that translates to questions that you all would ask as well. And the answers that Jake gave us today, wow, that was awesome.

I really appreciate everybody out there listening to Resilient. Once again, I get a lot of feedback, a lot of commentary on social media, which is fantastic. And we couldn't produce this podcast without a great partnership with our friends at Rivet Radio. So, Jeanine and others, thank you very much for everything that you do.

One of the things I would say is, as I indicated at the beginning, we've been on a bit of a hiatus which has given me the opportunity to go back and look at all the different interviews that we've done over the last 18 months. I am so proud of the different folks that we've interviewed and so thankful that they've given the gift of time. I reflected back on that incredible day in Savannah, Georgia with Keith Wandel. Or that awesome day, I think it was in Grapevine, Texas, with Paul Raines, the CEO of GameStop. He's the one that mentioned his nemesis, Pork Fat. I will never, ever forget that. Or Jackie Rice, a really good friend of mine. The chief risk officer at Target. Really giving insights in the way you could create valuable risk programs.

And I'll say, if you enjoy these conversations, I'd encourage you or I'd ask you as a favor just to share it with some friends and colleagues at work. And one of the things I talk about all the time is, you know I've shared it with folks that are not in the business world. And they've said, wow, this is interesting because I'm able to pull a lot of insights out that translate into my life. So don't be bashful. Share it with friends and family.

And if you have a minute, I would be so appreciative if you would just go on to iTunes or your podcatcher of choice and give us a rating. Tell us what you think. And then finally, hit me up on LinkedIn or Twitter or any of the social media channels and let me know what you think. And most importantly, if there is somebody, a leader out there, that epitomizes a resilient leader, let me know. Because I would love to talk to them. And quite frankly, most of the folks that I

interview are recommendations. So if you reach out to me and you have a great recommendation, I likely am going to reach out to them and hopefully we could get them on the podcast. And if you're looking for me, once again, my name's Michael Kearney, last name is K-E-A-R-N-E-Y. Send me a message and let me know what you think.

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