



SERVE offers help for returning veterans

BY JANICE GIBBS | TELEGRAM STAFF
Saturday, Apr 28, 2012 4:30 AM

Uquay Robinson, an Army and Marine Corps veteran, didn't accept the diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder.

"I thought they had it wrong," Robinson said.

It wasn't until eight or nine months later when her mother said Robinson had changed and she wasn't the same child, that the veteran admitted to having a problem.

After her mother's revelation, Robinson decided to sign up for the VA's Project SERVE, Study Evaluating Returning Veterans' Experience.

Project SERVE is a longitudinal study of veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. The goal of the study is to understand functional recovery over time.

Robinson spoke about Project SERVE at a reception for VA investigators at the Olin E. Teague Veterans' Medical Center earlier this week.

Robinson served in Mosul, Iraq, during 2004-2005 with the 293rd Military Police Company.

When she separated from the service she came to the VA for a routine appointment and saw a Project SERVE flyer.

“Veterans listen to other veterans,” Robinson said.

“Just like there’s a stigma about mental health among veterans, there’s also a stigma about research and we don’t necessarily understand the need for the work you do,” she told the researchers. “If you aren’t able to do research you won’t be able to determine what’s wrong or what resources are needed to combat the problem.”

Robinson said she has been serving as an unsolicited ambassador of the study, telling fellow veterans about Project SERVE. So far she recruited three others to participate.

She said she enjoyed the individual counseling that was part of Project SERVE, but was hesitant when she graduated to group therapy.

“It’s difficult to talk about and admit to having personal problems in a group,” Robinson said. “Plus, I was the only female, so the guys looked to me and would say ‘OK, you’re a girl and all touchy feely so you talk.’”

Once she opened up during group counseling about the traumas she had endured during deployment, the men followed suit.

Robinson said she had become emotionally numb and distant, and through counseling she learned to get back out in the world.

She returned to school and will complete her master’s degree in psychology in December.

Robinson said she has learned what triggers her PTSD reactions.

“When I notice I’m reverting I force myself to do the opposite,” she said. “Instead of withdrawing, I force myself to get out there.”

Robinson hopes to use her shared experiences and her advanced degree to work with other veterans.

“Like the guy in the Hair Club commercial, I’m not only the president, I’m also a client,” she said.

Since Project SERVE is a longitudinal study, Robinson will be a participant for years to come.

jgibbs@tdtnews.com