

## HEALTHY LIFE



### WELLNESS

## BOOTS IN THE GYM

Part of the nonprofit Home Base Southwest Florida, Warrior Health & Fitness helps veterans heal from physical and mental traumas through innovative wellness programs.

By Tess Raines

Southwest Florida is home to more than 100,000 military veterans, many of whom have returned from years of service burdened with physical ailments and invisible, mental and emotional wounds.

Home Base Southwest Florida—the local chapter of a national program founded by the Red Sox Foundation and Massachusetts General Hospital—aims to heal local heroes through specialized wellness programs that are designed to overcome barriers to care.

Recognizing that physical and mental health are interconnected, The Warrior

Health & Fitness Program exists within Home Base as a free, 90-day program, with individualized fitness regimens and wellness education. “Fitness meets a lot of needs—socially, physically—that carries over into your mental health,” says Armando Hernandez, a Marine Corps veteran and the program manager for the local Home Base chapter. “The veteran population has a high preexisting injury rate. They know how to stay fit but don’t know how to stay healthy.” The program steps in to teach participants how to exercise without exasperating injuries or creating

new ones, and how to live a balanced life.

When a participant joins the program, a trainer evaluates the veteran’s physical condition and designs a fitness program with specific goals. The vet spends the next three months training with fitness specialists at Florida Gulf Coast University’s gyms or at Greater Naples YMCA—two partners of the organization.

Warrior reaches beyond physical exercise to include other fitness fundamentals, including injury prevention; pre- and post-workout nutrition; and mental health skills for resiliency.

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## HEALTHY LIFE

WELLNESS

The program has already been life-changing for many local vets. One participant, Coleman Plummer, started his 12 years of marine service right after high school. He was deployed twice to Iraq; became a military police officer; and was stationed in California, Missouri, Japan and North Carolina. After he was discharged, Plummer moved his family to his hometown, Naples.

Transitioning back into civilian life brought several complications. Plummer stopped working out and his weight fluctuated. A delay in his VA acceptance made it difficult for him to find help for his pains. “Everything started flipping—my mental health, my physique,” Plummer recalls. “I started drinking to prevent the flashbacks.”

After being accepted into the VA, staff in the Whole Health program scheduled him for shoulder surgery and encouraged him to look into Home Base.

The specialists at Warrior Health coached Plummer through high-repetition calisthenic practices until he reached his target weight, then moved him into muscle-building exercises. His fitness regimen was supplemented with dietary guidance by Lee Health, which included a breakdown of proper portion sizes and recommendations to avoid processed or sugary foods.

Home Base also partners with Lee Health’s dietitians to offer frequent healthy-cooking classes for past and current Warrior participants and their families. It’s a way to connect the vets and show them how to prepare meals that cater to their dietary needs.

Plummer credits the staff and the other veterans in the program as the motivational force behind his progress. Six of the seven Home Base staff in Southwest Florida are combat veterans, a component which nurtures the innate camaraderie and kinship



The 90-day program is designed to address barriers to care and relies on the military spirit of camaraderie to empower participants.

Courtesy of Warrior Health

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among military men and women. Plummer calls it “another brotherhood.”

Service members can return anytime after the program ends to keep working out or just to maintain the camaraderie. They also have free access to the YMCA gyms for one year. “As much as we do want them to assimilate into the community, we want to be there for them as well,” Hernandez says.

Though he’s considered an alumni, Plummer sticks to a weekly workout routine and texts the coaches whenever he needs them. “If you want to lose some weight, they’ll encourage you. If you want to gain muscle mass, they’ll spot you,” he says.

Those struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder, depression or anxiety also have access to mental health care with Home Base through Lee Health. Veterans are introduced to these services when they join, but the decision to seek care is ultimately up to them. Hernandez says they’ll usually recognize their need or desire for mental health care as they make improvements in the Warrior program. “A lot of vets are not aware that they need clinical care,” he says.

The Lee Health mental health staff are trained under clinicians at Massachusetts General Hospital, who are well-versed in the latest evidence-based therapies around trauma, Hernandez explains.

Those needing more intensive care can opt for a two-week inpatient program in Boston that focuses on individualized therapy. “It’s about a year and a half worth of therapy in 14 days,” Hernandez says. Around 28 Southwest Florida veterans and service members have taken part in the program. Like the fitness portion, these services are also free.

Just last year, Home Base extended all the benefits of their program to the families of veterans and service



Home Base partners with Lee Health dietitians to host healthy-cooking classes as a way to connect vets and their families in activities that promote overall wellness. United States Army veteran Pierre Grauel and his wife, Yongsuk, participate in a cooking demonstration at the YMCA.

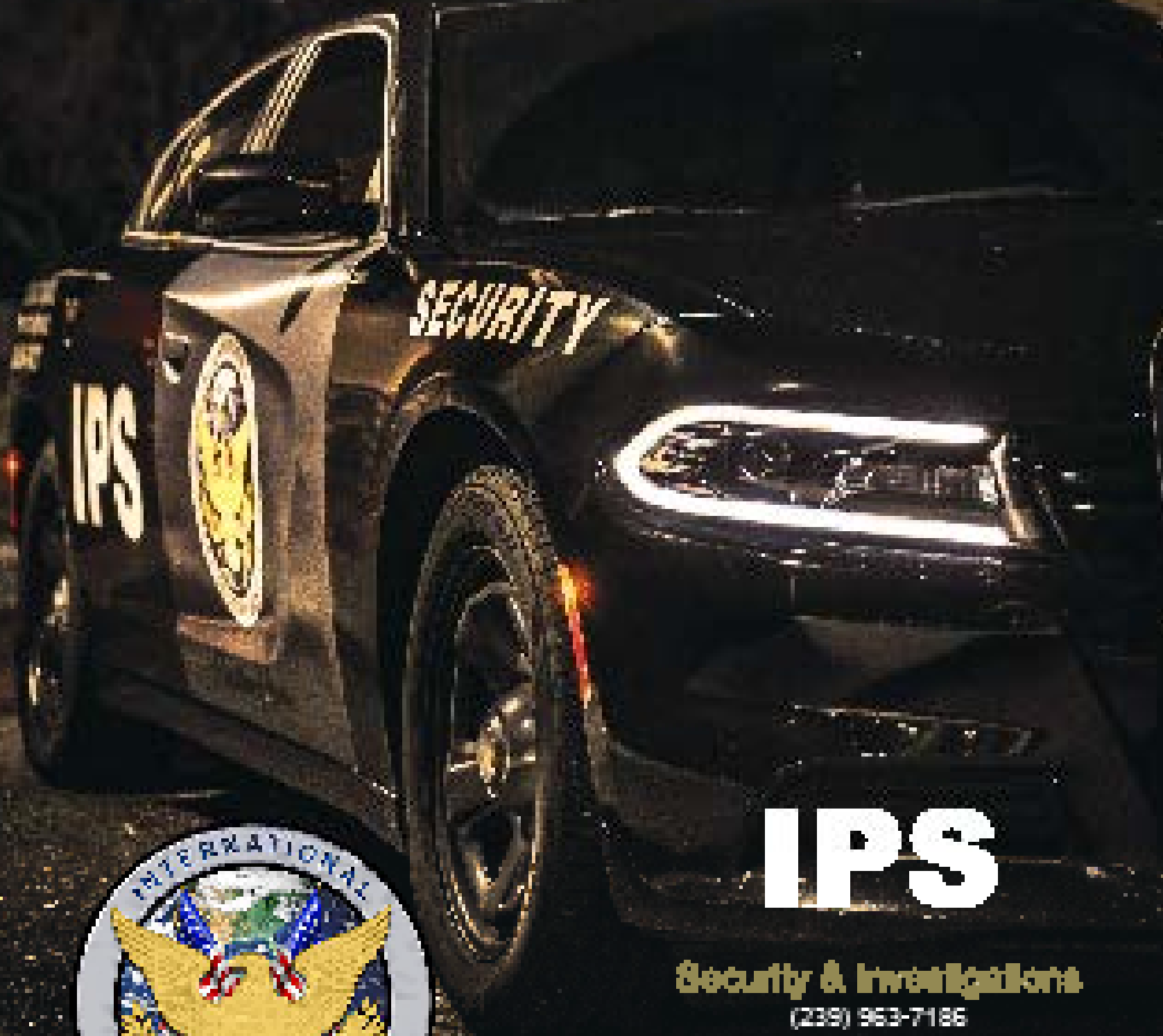
members. “When one member deploys, the whole family deploys,” Hernandez says.

Plummer’s wife, Christin, joined with him, and says she has significantly improved her mental health and been able to gain nine pounds of muscle.

Warrior Health and Fitness dismisses stigma and focuses on trust between the veterans and the staff, and building the veterans’ trust in themselves. Plummer notes that he’s quit smoking and hasn’t touched a drink in over a year. “I gave it up naturally because I feel good,” he says. “My body feels good again.”

When he runs into other veterans that aren’t familiar with the program, Plummer urges them to look into it. “It helps in every aspect,” he says. ■

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