

Hamilton County

NOW

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Celebrating Illinois' 200th birthday

Committed to veterans



Lady Foxes host pink-out game

Feast for the holidays

contents

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Features

- 3 Committed to veterans
- 5 Lady Foxes think pink
- 8 Remembering the 1925 tornado
- 10 Celebrating Illinois' 200th birthday
- 12 A winning team
- 14 Scenes from Fall Festival
- 16 From warehouse to home
- 18 Feast for the holidays

from the cover
Lady Foxes fans don pink to celebrate cancer recovery, page 3



Committed to veterans

Story by Travis Morse

McLEANSBORO — McLeansboro native and veterans' advocate Michael Little met President Trump in August when the president signed legislation renewing the Veterans Choice Program.

Little had lobbied aggressively for the legislation through his job with the Association of the United States Navy, meeting with more than 300 lawmakers. The Veterans Choice Program gives eligible veterans the chance to get care from private doctors instead of a VA medical facility.

"We realized if we didn't (renew) it that approximately 1.8 million veterans would be thrown back into a system that wasn't prepared to take them on in the first place," Little said.

Little's journey to become an impassioned voice for veterans began modestly with a two-page paper he wrote for a college English class.

At the time, in 2011, Little had recently finished two tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan as a Detention Operations Officer in the U.S. Navy Reserves and was attending Rend Lake College.

He had lost several of his military friends to suicide and had even tried suicide himself. Little, who was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, decided to write about military suicide for his English 101 class and that paper turned into a movement.

"I formed that (paper) into a platform to bring awareness to military suicide," Little said.

Little eventually wrote a letter to Congressman John Shimkus, urging action on the suicide problem. He also asked classmates to send copies of the letter as well. Little ended up meeting with Shimkus and a few months later told his story to the "Stars and Stripes" military newspaper, which featured Little in a cover story.

"I just became a veterans' advocate after that," Little said.

Little later moved to New York



and became a veterans liaison for New York State Sen. Mark Grisanti. He then started working as a legislative assistant for the Association of the United States Navy, an advocacy group that represents more than 430,000 Active Duty and Reserve sailors and 4.5 million Navy veterans. He is now the Director of Legislative Affairs and Government Relations for that organization and lives in Washington D.C.

"We support over 300 pieces of



legislation every year," Little said.

Little said the Veterans Choice legislation was likely the most compassionate law he helped pass.

The Veterans Choice Program was first established after a scandal at the Phoenix VA hospital in 2014 where veterans were waiting weeks or months for appointments.

Veterans who live in rural areas often have to drive long distances to get to a VA facility, which is unacceptable, Little said.

"When I think about my guys in McLeansboro (who have) cancer, maybe they shouldn't have to

drive to Marion when we have good oncologists in Mt. Vernon," Little said. "No veterans should have to wait more than 30 days for the care they're entitled to."

On Aug. 12, Little was on hand when President Trump signed an emergency funding bill to keep the Veterans Choice Program going. The press conference for the signing was cut short because it was the same day as the Charlottesville, Va., attack, but it was an important occasion nonetheless, Little said.

"I was very honored," he said. "It was the first time in my career I ever had the opportunity to meet a president."

Little was born in Evansville, Ind., but his family later moved to McLeansboro where he resided for many years.

He was a senior at Hamilton County Senior High when the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks happened.

"I was in shop class," Little said. "That's when I decided to join the military."

Currently a 2nd Class Petty Officer in the Navy Reserves, Little has served in the U.S. Navy for more than 12 years. He served aboard the USS Ronald Reagan and the USS Tarawa while on Active Duty from 2003 to 2006.

He then joined the Navy Reserves.

"There were never any times in Active Duty where I thought my life was going to end," Little said. "When I joined the Reserves and was deployed to Iraq, things changed."

Little served as a Detention Operations Officer while in the Reserves, under the command of the Army's 303rd MP Battalion in Iraq, and then under the command of the 16th MP (Airborne) Battalion in Afghanistan. His back-to-back deployments were from 2008 to 2010.

While deployed Little guarded detainees, many of whom physically or mentally attacked the U.S. soldiers, Little said. He even guarded some detainees who were forming ISIS. There were also daily assaults on the Afghanistan base where Little served.

"There were days that were good and there were days that were the worst days of my life," he said.

Little came home suffering from severe PTSD. He has now lost 15 of his friends to suicide. Little said if it wasn't for veterans he met at the American Legion Post 106 in McLeansboro, he likely wouldn't have made it. The Legion members talked Little out of suicide and got him to seek help at the VA.

"They saved my life," Little said.

Despite all the hardships and trauma, Little said he is very proud of his military service.

"My military service is pretty much my life," he said. "When I joined

the Navy, it's sort of what shaped me to be a man. (It's) probably the most memorable time of your life."

Little continues to advocate for military suicide awareness and veterans treatment reforms. He lives in Washington D.C. with his wife, Elizabeth, and his 1-year-old son. He still owns property in McLeansboro and he and his wife plan to retire there.

"It's very much home for both of us," he said.

