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Project helps put wounded warriors back on path

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A roadside bomb cost Sgt. Robert Blikle his left hand in Iraq, landing the National Guardsman at Walter Reed Army Medical Center wondering if he'd ever have a normal life again.

But a simple backpack with a shaving kit, CD player and sweat suit made his first days stateside a little more bearable. It also introduced him to an organization that convinced him he would be OK after all.

"Coming back, you don't know what to expect," said Blikle, of Spartanburg.

Then someone from the Wounded Warrior Project, which provided the backpack, stopped by. When the group had him whitewater rafting and rock climbing after such a serious injury, he knew he'd be able to go back to firefighting.

**Advertisement** "I never went rock climbing before," Blikle, a member of the Pelham-Batesville Fire Department, said at an event kicking off a fundraiser at Greenville Memorial Hospital. "And I thought if I can climb a rock, I can go back to fighting fires."

The WWP offers an opportunity for the nation to welcome its injured war heroes, said U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis, who was on hand for the event.

A fundraising banquet to benefit the project has been set for May 15 at Taylors First Baptist Church, said Jeff Holt, a member of the organizing committee.

And Dr. Sheldon Herring, clinical director of the brain injury and young stroke program at Roger C. Peace Rehabilitation Hospital, said the project provides a chance for the community to help.

"A lot of people around the country want to be able to do something, but you can't just run over to the local VA and volunteer to be a physical therapist," he said.

Aside from the backpack, the project provides other help to ease the transition to civilian life. It offers family assistance, peer mentoring and help getting back to work, and the disabled sports project, which brought Blikle to Colorado for rafting and climbing.

Blikle, 28, was deployed to Iraq in September 2004. A gunner on one of three Humvees providing security for a supply convoy, he lost his hand above the wrist when an improvised bomb exploded in March 2005, forcing his return to the U.S. and Walter Reed.

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