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Week 46: Fall Mission Feeding

James and Betty Robison

Jeremy Stalnecker and Branden Kunath

Studio discussion:

JAMES: I'm so glad you joined us today. I'm James Robison. My wife Betty and I welcome you to *Life Today*.

The people that I think are the greatest heroes on the planet are the military and the armed service members, and all those who are the first responders. I think you're heroes. Some of you might live a pretty rough life, I don't know. You've got to be pretty rough and pretty tough to take care of all of us who come under such fierce assault and do such foolish things, oftentimes, because you have to put your life in danger. And all of you in the armed services, you are risking your life and your limbs for our future and for freedom.

I can't tell you how much Betty and I love you. We do help. I ask God to give us a way as a ministry because when you're feeding the hungry and saving their lives and their very life depends on it, they have no tomorrow if you don't feed them. Drilling water wells and they've never had fresh water. They have deadly, germ-infested, contaminated water that kills their children, their grandchildren, and their families. And we set people free from sexual slavery and bondage. It is amazing. We give shoes and smiles for Christmas. We've built a hospital that takes care of facial and body injuries, physical, overseas. It is in Uganda. It is amazing. You do these things.

Now then we say God, how can we help our first responders? How can we help the armed service members? And God gave us Mighty Oaks as an answer to prayer. We brought the couple in that you heard this week. You can go back online and listen to them, Suzanne and Jeremy Stalnecker.

We have Jeremy today and one of the military, pretty rough guys. I'm going to ask him exactly how bad were you in the military doing what you were supposed to do? But then what happened? Well, you're going to meet him. So, Jeremy, I want to welcome you back to *Life Today*.

JEREMY: Thank you. It's great to be with you.

JAMES: I want you to tell us about your guest. He's a pretty big strong guy. I wouldn't cross him. I know you're a Marine, I know you're tough, but I believe I'd leave him alone. Tell me about him.

JEREMY: This is Branden Kunath. Branden is a retired Marine; served in a number of capacities. I think his claim to fame is, he will tell you he is a machine gunner, which he was for a long time. But also, a lot of machine gunners did six combat deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan. And came to the Mighty Oaks programs, one of our programs back in 2013?

BRANDEN: 2013.

JEREMY: 2013, by way of the Wounded Warrior Battalion and Marine Corps. Wounded service members can go to a place to get help. We had a good relationship at the time with that unit at Camp Pendleton.

Branden came to one of our programs. I won't speak for him but I think it changed his life. What's interesting about what we do at Mighty Oaks, and we say this all the time, is that there aren't professional clinicians. It is not a doctor speaking down to patients. Those who lead our programs, those who teach in our programs, those who lead -- Branden is our National Programs Director now; leads all of our programs for Mighty Oaks. We have all come through as students. We've all found help, hope, and healing and had the opportunity to stand in the place where we can say, we know where you are because we've been there. We've struggled the way that you've struggled but God worked in our life and will help you as well. That's what Branden is doing

every day at Mighty Oaks.

JAMES: I think you mentioned to me, Branden, you had a pretty rough time in your life, your childhood, and so forth. Why did you have those tough times when you were younger?

BRANDEN: Well, I come from a military family. My dad was in the army. I was born in Germany and we bounced back and forth from Fort Knox, Kentucky to Germany. I would tell you early on, I always wanted to join the military. That culture early on ingrained itself into me, the drinking, the partying, and all that stuff, I thought that was the norm.

And then quickly, after the first Gulf War, after Desert Storm was done, my dad got out of the army. That changed the home dynamic. I just struggled to figure out who I was, what was going on. I had some early abuse that happened. My dad was trying to figure himself out. He had his own trials and tribulations that he was struggling through. And unfortunately, he took it out on my sister and I.

That pushed us down this road to where I just grew up trying to figure out who I was, not letting anybody hurt me or abuse me. Then I was in and out of juvenile hall. I thought that was the cool thing at that time. It gave me some notoriety or something, almost like a badge of honor.

Then I threw a desk at my teacher in the 10th grade and then that kicked me out of the entire school board of Kentucky school system. I was like, "Dad, you joined the army so I'll join the army." So we went to see the recruiter. The recruiter was like, "Hey, we'd love to have you but you don't have any diploma. You don't have a high school diploma or GED or anything like that. There is nothing we can do." As I was about to leave, she interrupted me. She's like, "There is this thing I can introduce you to. It is a military academy. You can try to go there. You can apply and see if they'll accept you. It is a correctional military academy."

I guess I was the perfect candidate for them because they accepted me right away, and so I went. I went through that military academy. Funny enough, I graduated as an honor graduate, top of my class. Which I always joke, my mom doesn't like when I do it, but I always joke that all that

means is that I was the most improved of the bad kids. [Laughter]

So quickly from that, I literally graduated that military academy and next thing I know I'm at Marine Corps boot camp in Parris Island, South Carolina learning what a Marine was and how to become a Marine.

JAMES: And went where? Where was your service?

BRANDEN: So my first duty station was in Spain, Rota Spain. I was part of an anti-terrorism task force unit. At that time, 9/11 hadn't happened just yet. So the mission there and the environment was much different. We were protecting things.

Then we saw the Twin Towers and what happened. That just shifted everything. I think anybody that was around at that time knows exactly where they were at. I was at a school training. I remember all the training stopped. We were brought into a classroom and they had the TV on. I looked up and I honestly thought I was looking at a movie. I thought it was a scene out of Die Hard that I'd never seen before, or some movie I'd never seen. And then the captain, the officer in charge walks in and tells us what happened. And that shifted everything.

And then after that, I ended up in Iraq right after the initial push. So Jeremy went in early, early on. I called it where we came in and we were pretty much the tail end and we were kind of sweeping up behind them. We were part of a Marine expeditionary unit so we were on a ship. We floated over, flew in to a place called Umm Qasr, which was one of the main port areas. So we were doing anti-smuggling counter operations there. And then just some other security stuff. From that time, we had to get back on the ship because we had to make our way back home.

So that deployment, even though things happened, we were in Iraq, and the war was going on, I left that deployment feeling a little disappointed; like I didn't get the combat deployment I wanted or hoped for. I joined the Marine Corps to be an infantry guy. I became a machine gunner with that in mind. I knew what my job was. I knew what I was supposed to do. There was no war when I joined but the idea that it could happen was there.

So leaving that deployment, I felt a little bit down. I had just enough time on that first contract to where I could easily go back over. A unit needed non-commissioned officers to go over again. So I did what we call cross-decking and I just turned and burned and went on another one.

JAMES: As a machine gunner?

BRANDEN: As a machine gunner. So I went from the unit, First Battalion First Marines, to Second Battalion First Marines. I was part of echo company. I found myself in a city called Fallujah.

JAMES: And you ended up in Afghanistan too, right?

BRANDEN: In 2010, I ended up in Afghanistan. And through that time, the short time between 2005 and 2008 was really the only time I did not deploy. I was an instructor. I was a combat instructor.

JAMES: Did you realize how dangerous these people were that you were with in Afghanistan?

BRANDEN: One hundred percent.

JAMES: It was incredible. Because I knew Reagan and I knew General Daniel Graham, and the people that were the power in Afghanistan where Reagan was told these are the most dangerous people. They are more dangerous than the Soviet Union. You're resisting and using them to resist. They're actually more dangerous than the soviets would ever be. And of course, that proved to be very, very true. So you did finish out your service there, right?

BRANDEN: I did. Yes, sir.

JAMES: Why did you come home and when did you come home?

BRANDEN: Well, through that time, 2005, I perfected my craft as a machine gunner. I made that a part of me, the culture, especially the infantry, is who's the strongest? Who's the toughest? Who can drink the most, yell the most, cuss the most, get with the most ladies? All those things can just be rough, tough.

JAMES: That makes me sad when you're doing something so right, and yet the enemy can twist you up in your life to do so much so wrong. That's really the way the enemy operates. He is the greatest manipulator, deceiver. He's cunning, he's crafty, he's deadly. He's destructive.

By the way, that's the enemy we're standing against. It is not people, it is spiritual -- deceiving spirits and Satan.

Okay, now we need to cut to the place where he reached a point where things fell apart -- everything was coming apart. You end up involved with Mighty Oaks. Who wants to tell us how that happened, that connection?

JEREMY: What I knew about Branden when he came to Mighty Oaks was, and what I learned about Branden was his marriage was falling apart. This is the story -- it is sad to say to your point, this is the common story that the marriage is falling apart. We've tried everything else and there is really nowhere else to go. I think that's fair to say, right?

JAMES: Did you have children?

BRANDEN: Yeah.

JAMES: And everything is coming apart?

BRANDEN: Everything was coming apart.

JAMES: Would you say it is the after-effect of the war and all the things that have been programmed into you that were not necessarily healthy and meaningful, and now it is coming to

a head?

BRANDEN: Everything came to a head. That last deployment I was on was a non-combat deployment. It was just an operation.

That's where it almost felt like I hit mud and just stopped. The best way that I was able to operate was when I was really busy. Like during firefights or under stress, I could think the clearest. Everything kind of slowed down and I could separate real well.

But when I was at home, if we didn't order fast enough in the drive-through at a fast food restaurant I would lose my mind. Or if something didn't happen the way I wanted it to, I would lose my mind. So I could operate the best I could as a Marine but when I went home, I was a complete mess. I didn't know how to communicate with my wife. I did not know how to communicate with my kids. There was a moment when I came back from a training event and my daughter was two. I walked in the door, it was late at night, and I remember her falling kind of off the couch where my wife and daughter were resting. She got tangled up in the blanket; she was so excited to see me. She went to run over because I came through the door as I'd just come home from training. I don't remember a moment like that later on. It was actually where's Camille? Where's my daughter? When I'd come home, my son, they would disappear. They scattered because they didn't know what dad was going to come home. They didn't know what was going to set me off.

The biggest soul-crushing thing for me to hear was when my wife would say to my kids, "Calm down! Be quiet. We don't want to upset dad." The place that my kids, my wife, anybody should be the most safe or feel the most protected is in their home and here I am just an absolute monster.

I could say it was because of my deployments. I could say it was because of childhood trauma, all those things, but I chose to act that way. Now there are things that happened inside of me, the way I would respond to certain sounds, smells, those are normal, those are natural. But I chose to respond this way, to be a menace.

BETTY: When did you feel like you had gotten to a point where you had to have help or you were going to do something really bad?

BRANDEN: It never came to that point. It was here and there I would notice it but I'd pushed it down. I got to the point where I didn't even care that I didn't even care anymore. Like most people would be like, man, what's going on with me? I would do that, but I just didn't even care about it. When my wife and I would get into a fight, I would laugh about it. I would hurt people or -- it was easy to destroy other things because I felt like I didn't deserve it. I didn't know how to operate anything. I was like Ferdinand. I would destroy everything around me on purpose.

But it finally got to the point where I said, I'm done. I kept hearing about this thing, Mighty Oaks at that unit. I didn't want to take part in the events or the groups there. But this one, just something spoke to me in it.

JAMES: Was there a Mighty Oaks close by?

BRANDEN: The program was about four hours from Camp Pendleton. A church that I would end up going to later actually volunteered to drive a group of us up when we went. But I went with completely selfish reasons. I went to get away. Like I just wanted to get away. The place looked nice. They said you're going to go to a really nice place. You're going to get fed well and other things will happen. It is faith-based, and they kind of left a little bread crumbs for us but I went to just completely get away.

JAMES: Okay. We've got just a few minutes left but what happened there?

BRANDEN: Well, I didn't like what I was hearing at all. The truth hurts, especially when someone is poking you in the chest and asking those hard questions. When you don't have the ability to answer it properly where you can't answer when you became a man. What does a man even look like? What does that mean? And then when you ask that question of the legacy that you're going to leave, is it going to be one worth leaving? We're going to leave one regardless

of whether we want to or not, but if I was to box me up, hand it over to my kids or my wife or anybody that would take it, and wonder what they were going to do with it, I didn't like the response whether they kept it, chucked it.

But I was not leading my family. I wasn't leading my home. I was not in any way, shape, or form leaving an inheritance for my children's children. And for me to answer that question of my eternity and where I truly will end up, I didn't like the answer to that.

So I submitted my life to Christ on a Wednesday night there and just dedicated everything. I think about Romans 10:14. "How will they know the truth that's out there if no one is preaching it?" So I kind of dedicate myself to that, and making sure that the same hope, healing, and restoration that I've been introduced, God remolding my heart, putting a new one in me, I can make that opportunity for other people.

JEREMY: That's good.

JAMES: And you were changed?

BRANDEN: One hundred percent.

JAMES: Could your wife tell?

BRANDEN: My wife had no idea who Jesus was. She had never opened a Bible before that. So when I was telling her, okay, I'm doing this and all these other things, I thought she was going to be on board. I was clueless and pretty naive.

What I didn't realize is that, as my wife would say, I was on this new road to righteousness because I had wiped my slate clean -- not me but my slate was wiped clean, I was good. But what I forgot was all the destruction and mayhem that I had left in the past.

So my wife felt left out. She felt like I was leaving her behind. She was used to me saying,

"Sorry! I won't do it again." She was waiting for me to pick her up and slam her back down because I had said it before. I'm done drinking. I'm sorry, didn't mean to do this, that, and the other. I'd immediately go back to it because it was behavior changes and modifications but I didn't have a heart change.

For me to feel that I was changed and actually feel -- I cried like a baby in front of a whole bunch of strangers at a place called Sky Rose Ranch in central California almost 11 years ago. It was the first time I had emotions. I just had this wave that I couldn't deny Christ working in me.

JAMES: Thank you, God! And she saw it and she's changed?

JEREMY: Yeah. Jeanette's story is that she accepted Christ through Mighty Oaks as well. And now, you've heard about our women's program, she is very, very involved with our women's program. Same thing, to Branden's testimony of preaching to others what Christ has done in her life.

JAMES: This is the story of Mighty Oaks. Branden is one of the leaders. His wife is helping and a source of inspiration. We're asking you to help us put another man like this through the Mighty Oaks experience and be changed. It takes \$3500, isn't that right, for a man to go through? You pay everything. You get their transportation there, home, take care of everything while they're there -- period, men and women.

Would you pay someone's way? We want to send 30 men through; that's our goal this week. One week -- that's \$105,000. That's why we're doing all the other things we have to do. You don't want to take from a hungry child or somebody that needs clean water and do something different. This is something we're doing right now, this week. Could you help? Would you help, please?

Would you say thank you to the armed service members and the first responders for their protection of our freedom and our future and our families? Would you please do that? Would you right now get your bank card or your checkbook, make the biggest gift you can and call and

tell us it's going in the mail? Or I put it online, and put it on my card now. Please do it.

Branden, we're so thankful to God for changing you. So thankful you're spending your life now helping the other service members. We want to thank you, Jeremy, for what you and your wife are doing, and what Mighty Oaks is doing. Let's be a part of it.

Help us right now this week to perform a miracle. We're going to see 30 men's lives changed. We're going to say thank you to a whole lot more than that by showing them how much we love them and appreciate them. You do what God is leading you to do.

Cause Spot:

ANNOUNCER: We live in a country with nearly 23 million veterans. Sadly, many of those who have served come home carrying the invisible scars of war. With 22 veteran suicides each day, and so many of our nation's heroes, including first responders, suffering posttraumatic stress, these men and women often live in despair.

But you can help make a difference today and offer these warriors a bright new future. *LIFE Outreach International* is excited to honor our nation's bravest men and women as we partner to send 30 veterans and first responders through the legacy program offered by Mighty Oaks.

Here these heroes will be equipped with tools to fight through life's challenges and uncover their God-given purpose in life. At a cost of \$3500 per participant, a total of \$105,000 is needed to make this possible. Please give what you can as a way of providing hope and saying thank you to those at the core of the freedoms we enjoy. Call, write, or make your gift online.

Studio good-bye:

JAMES: Well I'm thanking Jeremy, and I thank Branden. Of course, Suzanne for all that they're doing, all that Mighty Oaks is doing. Thank you for helping us today.

Betty, this has been a real answer to prayer. Just thank God for the armed service members, for the first responders, and let them know how much they mean to you. Go over and buy them a meal sometime if you see them at a restaurant. Just tell them you love them. See somebody with a badge, thank them for wearing it. Thank them for standing up for freedom.

I love you two guys. I really do. I'm proud of you. Y'all stay in touch with us. We're going to keep you informed of what's going on and what happened this week. I pray we go above and beyond what we're talking about. But you do all you can do to help. Betty and I thank you for putting God's arms around a lot of people. It means a lot that you're putting God's arms around the first responders and the armed service members. They are true heroes. They really are. To me, you're a hero by sharing his love and his will. Thank you so much.

Endorsements Montage:

>> You're not dead until you're no longer breathing, and yet there are a lot of people who are breathing who are living like they're dead.

>> I started listening to them. Everything they said just kept hitting me in the heart over and over and over again. It is like all the things that I didn't know that I needed to hear. I opened my heart to God that week. I've been a different person ever since. I can't even describe how quickly all that emptiness that I had that I couldn't fill with women, with drugs, with liquor, with anything -- [snaps fingers] Boom!

>> I was immediately greeted by a staff of men that knew what I was going through, had been in my shoes.

>> You could imagine a rope with a thousand knots and little by little each knot was being undone.

>> Everything that I was told here just made sense to me. It's given me like a new lease on life.

>> I thank God for saving me.

>> They're exposing the pain for you to understand where it is coming from. And for you to move forward.

>> This is the first week in a long time where I've laughed and I smiled.

>> When I think about my husband, I can't imagine the man that he was before. And now, he is the one that brings the peace in our home. In the past two to three years, we've been through some of the hardest things personally as parents and just a lot of trials that we've ever been through, and I know it would have wrecked our marriage if we didn't have Mighty Oaks.

[Cheers]