This is Jen Lee, the host of I Need Blue. I came face to face with danger, now I spend my time giving back to survivors and the heroes that saved us. We share victim turned survivor stories. When you come face to face with danger, you learn not to take your safety for granted. Now more than ever, it is important to use facts from real life situations to reinforce the valuable need of our law enforcement. To hear my story and hear other episodes, visit [www.ineedblue.net](http://www.ineedblue.net) or find I Need Blue on your favorite podcast platforms.

Please note: I Need Blue does feature graphic themes, including but not limited to violence, abuse, murder, and may not be suitable to all listeners. Some episodes also contain themes which may be triggering. Please take care of yourself and don't hesitate to ask for professional help.

Erika Unberhagen, is a 15-year veteran law enforcement officer whose career ended four years after being selected as Officer of the Year in the fifth largest county in the State of Texas due to alcohol use disorder and undiagnosed PTSD. She struggled for over 13 years. That struggle resulted in divorce, the loss of her children, her career, her self-respect, her desire to live, and eventually lead to homelessness. And this is just part of her story.

The message she shares today are those of hope and understanding the strength which lies in asking for help. She is focused on ensuring help is available.

 In recovery for over eight years now, she is a licensed therapist and chemical dependency counselor at Windmill Wellness Ranch in Canyon Lake, Texas where she specializes in the treatment of first responders and veterans for addiction, PTSD, and other co-occurring mental health disorders. She and Windmill Wellness Ranch are for the blue, BY the blue.

My other special guest is, Shannon Malish, a licensed clinical social worker who is married to a veteran and retired police officer. Together with her husband Kris, they opened Windmill Wellness Ranch to support not only the first responders in getting the treatment they deserve, but also to help the family of law-enforcement navigate this journey. Kris, Shannon, and Windmill Wellness Ranch, look forward to treating more law-enforcement officer and their families. For additional information visit: [www.windmillwellnessranch.com](http://www.windmillwellnessranch.com)

Shannon

Hi, my name is Shannon militia. I'm the founder of Windmill Wellness ranch. We are located on 76 acres in the beautiful hill country of Canyon Lake, Texas. Windmill was created out of a need. I am a wife of a retired police officer and veteran. My heart envisioned a place to treat those who have served in the military or are first responders. We also wanted to treat the wives and children as I know very well, those households are very different than what we call a normal household.

Erika

My name is Erka Unberhagen and I am a 15 year veteran of law enforcement. I am a Licensed Master of Social Work and licensed Chemical Dependency Counselor here at Windmill Wellness Ranch. My story began many years ago. I had many traumas in childhood, I grew up in an extremely dysfunctional home, physical abuse, mental abuse, emotional abuse, and sexual abuse. I thought I was dealing with that, and I thought I was dealing with that appropriately.

The lack of control, a lack of a voice growing up, got into a profession where I had a sense of control in how things were taking place. Looking back, I was just opening myself up for more injury. Between the injuries I had incurred in childhood, 15 years in law enforcement, and the types of cases I worked, it created more trauma. Back then we did not talk about post-traumatic stress disorder, and we certainly didn't talk about addiction. It was very much a suck it up buttercup type environment, which I'm working diligently today to try to dismantle because it's killing first responders from the inside out.

When I got into law enforcement, I chose one specific police department that I really wanted to work for. I made that happen. I started out as a Police Explorer where I used to ride around with the officers. When I was a teenager, I made the statement that eventually I was going to come to work there. I did! When I first started, it was still very much a male dominated profession, more so than it is today. I really had to go above and beyond to prove my merit, my worth, and to earn the respect and trust of my colleagues.

Unfortunately, one of the lessons I learned early on in that career was “work hard, play hard.” Choir practice was very much a thing. My first Sergeant owned a bar in the same city which we worked in. Looking back, it wasn't the greatest idea in the world but that's what was going on back then. The other officers taught me the way to handle stress, and the way to handle a bad call. It was certainly not to talk about how you were damaged by it, or how you were negatively impacted by it, but rather, get drunk.

 I took that to heart, as I didn't have a lot of coping skills to begin with. At the time, alcohol seemed like a perfectly okay, socially acceptable, solution. If you fast forward 15 years later, I am a complete mess. 4 years before, I was officer of the year, in the 5th largest county in the state of Texas and I was already dying inside. Nobody had taught me about the importance of self-care. It wasn't a concept. I certainly couldn't tell other officers what I was struggling with. It's difficult enough for a male officer, but as a female officer, the last thing that you want to do is to do is “show weakness.”

 My first call out of field training, ended up being a suicide by Officer. He was a distraught 18-year-old and was upset about the breakup with his girlfriend. I was sent to a psychologist which is standard within most departments when there's an on-duty shooting incident. Of course, I lie because at this point, I'm a single parent, I have a young child at home, and this is what I want to do. I worked hard to get into this career. The psychologist asked me standard questions. “Are you having nightmares over this?” “No, absolutely not. “I said. “Are you having intrusive memories?” “No, absolutely not.” “Do you feel anxiety?” I lied the entire time and of course, I was cleared and put back on the road. I couldn't talk to anybody about that. In fact, the solution with the officers who were there at that time, we all went out and drank. That was our way of processing, so to speak.

 I was one of the first responders to the Luby’s massacre in Killeen, TX which killed 22 and ultimately led the gunman to commit suicide. I was extremely young, and I'm getting some lessons I don't think any amount of training can prepare you for.

Toward the end of my career, alcohol has stopped being something that I'm doing socially. I don't want people to know how much I'm drinking at this point. I don't want to be around other people when I'm drinking. Now, as a therapist, I understand I was isolating. I didn't know that's what that was back then. I couldn't handle life. I couldn't handle small things. I've got a young child, an infant at home who is 9 months old when 9/11 took place. My oldest son was 11- 12 years old, and I'm drinking myself to death nightly.

I can't wait to get off work. In fact, it got to the point where I couldn't even get home to start drinking. I would buy alcohol or have alcohol from the day before and I would be drinking before I even showed up to my doorstep. Eventually, the drinking cost me everything including a 10-year marriage which ended in divorce. Thankfully, I didn't look at it that way back then. Thankfully, my then husband, saw fit to remove my children from my life because I couldn't take care of myself, let alone two young children. The irony in all of this is, I specialized in child abuse investigations for 8 of my 15 years in law enforcement. I lost my home. Eventually I lost my sanity, I lost my self-respect. The things I was telling myself at that point, I wouldn't tell my worst enemy. I was telling myself those things constantly; I was weak, I couldn’t handle things, I was a loser, I was a drunk, I was a horrible mother in a horrible way. I understand today I was sick; I was extremely sick.

I was In and out of inpatient treatment facilities and couldn't stay sober. I'd get out of treatment, and the day I'd get out, I go right back to drinking. There were things I didn't want to talk about, I didn't want to face, both from childhood and professionally. Those were the things which were hitting my gut from the inside out, it was literally a slow death. Multiple suicide attempts, I was suicidal. I bordered on homicidal with the ex-husband and a personal situation going on. What started out as half a glass of wine when I come home while I was still married, was growing into and eventually became two fifths. So two fifths of 80 proof whiskey, I was drinking lethal amounts of alcohol, I should not be here today. I shouldn't be able to form complete sentences since I survived, but I'm apparently able to.

I realized true strength lies in asking for help, it's having the courage to do that. I didn't do that willingly, but I did it because I was left no other choice. I was going to die from this; the amount I was drinking and the situations I was putting myself into. Eventually I became homeless and had no place to live except hefty garbage bags. I'm not living at this point, I’m subsisting.

I'm so sick I can't even show up to court the day of my divorce to sign my children away. I was highly intoxicated the day that happened and as soon as I signed, I couldn't wait to get back outside the courthouse so I could go right back to drinking because it was my sole focus. It was the first thing I thought of in the morning and it was the last thing I thought of before I passed out at night.

 I'm drinking myself to death. I'm homeless, I'm divorced, I'm childless. I have no money, no car, no career prospects, nothing! I have nothing except for alcohol. I always seemed to manage to find a way to have that in my possession. At this point in my addiction, alcohol wasn't enough, so I starting to add other things into it. I am an alcoholic, and I am an addict in recovery today.

 I can't tell you what spurred this but on March 10th of 2013, I called a friend of mine. I said,” I need you to get me to a meeting.” She says, “what meeting do you have?” And I said, “it's an AA meeting. I need you to get me to a meeting.” She came and got me. She looked a little confused because when she picked me up, I had a fifth of whiskey in my hand. She said, “I thought you said you were going to one of those AA meetings?” I said, “don’t! Just don't question me. Just get me there, please.” I got there, and I managed to polish off most of the rest of the bottle. I'm very much in active addiction and I think subconsciously I knew that the end was coming.

I poured what was left out and I call 9-1-1 on myself. It’s a phone call I will never forget. I’m sitting on the front porch, an hour early for the meeting, and I call 9-1-1. “What's your emergency?” I said,” I'm drunk.” “Ma'am, can you please state the nature of your emergency?” and I said, “I'm going to drink until I'm dead.” That seemed to cause a reaction and they sent an ambulance and picked me up. I have acute alcohol poisoning. That's the 3rd acute alcohol poisoning that I've had, and it is now trip number 3 for me to the psych ward.

One of the medical staff comes in the second day and says we're releasing you at 2 o'clock tomorrow. What are your plans? I said, “Lady, I have none. I have no place to go. I have no one. I burned my bridges with everyone.” She gave me a list and says start calling and see if you can find a place that will take you. Every place that I called asked the same first question; how are you going to pay for this? I'm explaining to them that I'm dying from this and they're wanting to know how I'm going to pay. I'm telling them I don't have a job; I have nothing. I’m on number 8 and only have a couple more places to call. Before they could say much, I said, “I

have no car, no job, no family, I have nothing and no one. What I do have is knowledge. My knowledge is that if I get out tomorrow, and I don't have someplace to go, I will die. I don't want to die. I thought I did, but I don't.”

I forgot how to live. I knew how to subsist and that's what I've been doing for over 13 years. I had dropped off the face of the planet. I certainly didn't know how to participate and be a constructive citizen in society. In those 13 years, I was arrested a total of 7 times, twice by my own department. One of those arrests was by an officer that I trained, and I had been a Sergeant on my shift. It still wasn't enough to get me to stop drinking. In fact, it just kept speeding it up. I was drinking more and more and as I'm talking to this lady, phone call # 8, there's a long pregnant pause. I'm thinking she's going to tell me the same thing. She can't help me. She says, “What time did you say they were going to let you go?” I said, “around two o'clock tomorrow afternoon.” She said, “look for a white van.”

 I got released the next day between 2 and 3, and there in the parking lot was a white van. I don't think I've ever been so happy to see a white van, or a vehicle in my entire life. I get in, I have no idea where I'm going, I just know that someone has come to get me and there's a chance I may not have to get loaded again anytime soon. She brings me to a homeless woman shelter. Come to find out, this lady was a three-time convicted felon with our own history of addiction and recovery. She was able to blow through and punch holes through my ego in a way that no one else had. She's the one who finally helped me to understand that if I didn't start doing things which other people were doing to get and stay clean and sober, I would die from this. I stayed there for several months and was able to start a job. It certainly wasn't anything like law enforcement, but it was a start. I didn’t just get a new start, but this was the beginnings of me building a new life for myself.

My recovery date is March 10th of 2013. About 18 months into my own recovery, one of the things which kept me from being honest and forthcoming within treatment is if you can't talk about what your injuries are, then you can't heal from them.

I thought to myself, I want to be that person that other first responders can come to. I've walked this. I've lived this and I don't want another person to go down that path. I don't want one more person to get stuck in the abyss of addiction.

I went back to school, got my bachelor's degree and eventually my master's. I worked at a couple of different treatment facilities; however, no other treatment center compares to Windmill Wellness Ranch. I absolutely love it here! There's a small part of me that wishes this place would have been open during my own story and struggles with addiction. But I have come to understand that everything happens in His time, not mine. I'm very grateful to be here.

 I work with first responders; I work with veterans and a lot of our injuries are very much the same. The loss of identity, we have moral injury, we have traumas that you're not going to necessarily be comfortable talking about in a group of people that have never lived that life. I don't want to talk about a dead infant, some horrible accident that I work, a suicide call, or a case that I worked involving childhood sexual assault. I didn't want to talk about those things in front of somebody who has zero idea of what that was all about. One of the things I love about Windmill Wellness Ranch, is clients are encouraged to tell their story in a very loving, very supportive environment. I am absolutely blessed today to be just a small part of that process.

Jen

I am glad that you were able to find them as well. Did you get any type of counseling or therapy to deal with your childhood trauma? Or did you just kind of in your own mind say “Yeah, I'm good. I'm good.”

Erika

I thought I was good. When I was still in law enforcement, we would talk with kids out on the street about how you can be better than the circumstances you come from. I truly thought I had separated myself from the child I used to be from those experiences. I thought I was better; I didn't think I had a problem. I thought I had overcome all my obstacles. What I later found out is those experiences left me with almost no resiliency. I did not know how to handle life's problems, I had an extremely high baseline anxiety level, and knowing what I know now, I would have qualified for Childhood Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. That wasn't a thing back then. I also have addiction on both sides of my family, maternal and paternal, it runs very deep in both sides of my family. So genetically, I did not win the lottery. When you combine all the about with a lack of resiliency, multiple cumulative traumatic experiences, not just in childhood, but professionally, you're raw. You're absolutely raw. The problem with alcohol and drugs, is they come in and say, You know what, I can put a band aid on this and I can make you not feel. Meanwhile it's stealing your soul out from under you.

Jen

Was there a final trigger or a final experience which pushed you over the edge to where the drinking overcame you?

Erika

It was a combination of things. It's not just one thing. The first time I was in in-patient treatment, I was served divorce papers. Since I couldn’t talk about anything, I drink the day I got out. Toward the very end of my career in law enforcement, I had the unresolved trauma from the shooting incident, and I had the unresolved trauma from the Luby’s massacre. One of my childhood friends mother, was one of the deceased inside the Lubys building at the time. I used to vacation with them, so I knew her mother very well.

I was working a double homicide suicide. That case involved a 15-year-old and an 8-year-old child, I had a seven-year-old son at that time so there was a lot of transference; me going into that crime scene and seeing a male child lying in bed, but I wasn't seeing that male child, I was seeing my son. I think if you're going to ask for one lynchpin, my first Field Training Officer ended up being a suspect in the aggravated sexual assault of all 3 of his grandchildren. They brought me the case, and I asked not to be assigned. That's the one and only time I've ever refused to work a case and said, “I know this guy.” He was the guy who owned the bar. I knew him and I didn't want to work the case. Literally, I was told to suck it up, and do your job.

He ended up committing suicide over that case. His wife went against my wishes when I told her to please not tell him about the investigation. I wanted to get him into custody before I interviewed him because I knew. He was the 8th person who committed suicide, where the cases involved children. I got a phone call at home, and they wanted me to go and photograph his body where it was found behind one of the guard shacks. Now, I'm already drinking myself to death and I refuse to do that. There was a quick succession of phone calls, going all the way up the chain of command. I was so lit, drunk, and sick to the point, I basically have the same thing to tell every person that called, which was not nice. I knew that was the end of my career. To be honest with you, it was coming to an end anyway. I had told my Chief of Police I was drinking too much. That day when I walked out of his office, rather than having help made available, or even being told “you need help”, I knew walking out of his office, my career was coming to an end. It was within a week of that conversation that my Sergeant committed suicide.

Jen

We have no idea what it's like for a law enforcement officer. I am so glad you took the first step. It is always the hardest. When you were driven to the AA meeting with the whiskey in your hand, had your whiskey become your security blanket at that point?

Erika

Did it become my everything? It was my friend; it was my confidant. It was my lover. It was my psychologist. It replaced my children because I certainly had protective instincts going over that thing. I would literally sell my soul to keep that bottle in my hand. It became my world, and I had become a slave to it. It was the only thing I ever thought about constantly. if I didn't have it, I was trying to figure out how I was going to get it. If I did have it, then I was trying to plan and do what I needed to do to make sure that when that one ran out, there was more behind it. It wasn't just a security blanket, it was everything! It was my sole focus because everything else in my life was too painful to look at.

Jen

When you dumped the last of that bottle out, you knew it could be your last sip?

Erika

I was hoping. I wasn't going to be able to continue. I don't think at the rate I was drinking; I would have had more than a couple more months to live. And that's if I didn't eat my gun or take myself out before that.

Jen

Shannon, the individuals who come to Windmill Wellness Ranch, how common are the stories like what Erika shared with us?

Shannon

Very common. There are many centers, but what we do is unique. When they find us, the first thing we handle is the trauma vs focusing on the substance first. The substances is not the problem it’s the symptom. The problem could be childhood trauma, work, somehow related to what someone witnessed, etc. We've got to handle that, before the substances are going to stop. It takes time to make sure we see all the targets.

Also, we've got to figure out what type of therapy is going to work with this individual. Different things work for different people. Some people cannot relive telling the whole story and that's fine, there are other ways we do this. We find what individually works so we're able to work it out of them and it isn't vibrating inside waiting to explode in a behavior.

Jen

www.WindmillWellnessRanch.com. You help people physically, spiritually, and emotionally.

Shannon

Yes, and we and the staff, do such an incredible job of it. My husband is retired, but he also works here. He's able to talk to our first responders and our police officers who come through. I work with the wives and children. I told my husband, kind of as a joke, our kids are growing up in a household with a cop and a therapist, they're going to be screwed up. You know, I'll never forget reading the book Beyond The Badge and going “no wonder, I'm not the only one in this situation.” [https://www.amazon.com/Behind-Beyond-Badge-Firefighters-Dispatchers/dp/1943106126/ref=sr\_1\_1?crid=1N29YIZ1JOILB&keywords=beyond+the+badge+book&qid=1649359554&sprefix=beyond+the+badge+book%2Caps%2C97&sr=8-1](https://www.amazon.com/Behind-Beyond-Badge-Firefighters-Dispatchers/dp/1943106126/ref%3Dsr_1_1?crid=1N29YIZ1JOILB&keywords=beyond+the+badge+book&qid=1649359554&sprefix=beyond+the+badge+book%2Caps%2C97&sr=8-1)

 At Windmill Wellness Ranch, our team is dedicated and educated. They're good at what they do. Our nurses are trained in trauma. It's a different talented and educated group because we're coming at this from the right angle, *what's happening underneath*. To use Erica as an example, she said, alcohol was a band aid she was putting over a bullet wound which was gushing everywhere. At Windmill Wellness Ranch, we've got to get into the bullet wound and begin healing from there.

Jen

Can you tell us when it was founded, and how you have evolved? How can somebody come in and get the treatment that you offer?

Shannon

It's voluntary. We don't have anybody here that doesn't want to be here. Not that everybody wants to be here every minute of every day, but it’s voluntary. We're on 76 acres with walking trails. You have got to have some “want” to be here, but that “want” is usually a push from someone else. Erika’s story is unique, but usually a family member has gotten involved and said, “enough's enough. I can't watch you kill yourself anymore. You're going to this place.”

The way it was founded was I had to run 12 other centers in 3 different states. I'd try to change the focus from being on substances and more so on mental health and trauma which had occurred. I couldn't do that because they had a budget they had to meet. It's expensive to retain educated staff with the proper licensure. I finally said, forget it. We're going to do this. We've got to be able to help our first responders and we’ve got to do it right.

So on a wing and a prayer, I'm not kidding you, my husband drove by this property, saw a handwritten “for sale by owner” sign and he said, “Let's do this!” I went to banks for 8 months and took (10) 0% Credit cards out and did everything we could do. Currently, there’s 90 staff members, 16 buildings, full-service gym, and kitchen with chefs. I'm not trying to make it fancy, but you must know what you're putting in your body because it's feeding your brain. The other interesting thing we do is, EGS which allows us to see in their brain, especially our trauma folks and first responders. Truly, the area where emotional availability is, it's called F 8, it's completely off and T 4 where the emotional memory is. We're able to magnetically stimulate those areas and bring them back in balance. It is the most amazing thing to watch. It helps other things such as depression, anxiety, even tinnitus. To watch somebody come out of that fog while getting therapy and balancing their brain, is the most beautiful thing to watch. I can't explain it. It's true healing.

Jen

Windmill Wellness Ranch is the only facility which offers this technology?

Shannon

That's correct. There is a place in California, but it is not a facility. We are treating athletes who have had multiple concussions. For example, if we've got a soldier who has been hit by an IUD or been concussed, we're able to help them. I just finished treating a NFL player named Eric Dickerson, and a UFC fighter his name's Chuck Liddell. They want me to say their names because they're out there talking about how this treatment has saved their life. They cannot believe their brain was brought back after so many concussions.

Jen

Where do you get funding?

Shannon

Well, it started with (10) 0% credit cards. The funding was many, many loans through the bank. We're getting to the end of those.

We take insurance and do sponsorships. We work on a sliding scale. I think it's because we're always trying to do the right thing all the time, that we've been able to succeed the way we've been able to succeed. Erika calls me two weeks ago and says, “I got a guy, he's a cop. He's in Southern California, he doesn't have anything.” I said, “get him a ticket and get him in here.” We do, what we can, when we can.

Jen

If someone wants to provide a sponsorship, or some sort of financial donation, how do they do that?

Shannon

**Email me, Shannon@windmillwellnessranch.com** and I will connect them with the woman who watches our funding. she'll help with some things like plane tickets, partial funding of treatment, psychiatrist visits, those kinds of things.

Jen

What is your capacity for individuals who come in for recovery?

Shannon

52 beds are what we have. It does not feel like a hospital. It does not feel like a center and that's why I wouldn't even name it treatment center. Forget it. This is about getting people well. Then we have a transitional living environment for people who need to step out, but still have the safety net. Maybe they're still doing trauma work. This allows them to be able to live in those homes, which is another 20 beds. They get back to life, get their car back, start going grocery shopping, dealing with the stressors of life, and they can go talk to their therapist if needed.

Jen

It's progressive?

Shannon

Yes. Everybody needs something different, and we don't know what that is until we start working with them.

Jen

You really focus on the individual. Like Erica said, it's tough to take that first step. When somebody comes to your ranch, what is the first day like?

Shannon

They should expect to have a feeling of relief and they will know they have come to the right place; there is hope for them. Many people think there isn't hope; nobody can fix me. That’s not true.

The first day they will be brought in by the community, and if they need to detox, they don't need to worry about going through withdrawals; we handle detoxification beautifully. They will not feel any detoxification symptoms because we've got medical and nursing on site.

They will have a sense of “okay, I finally found a home” and then they look at others and go, “Oh my gosh, they look just like me.” There are these thoughts of “they're all going to be crazy” or “no one's going to understand me.” Instead, they're going to look at another police officer and go, “Oh, my gosh, he's hurting too.” The hardest part of the process is coming through the front gate. That's the hardest part. Once they do that, life starts, it really starts.

Erika

I am a former first responder that treats and specializes in the treatment of first responders. There's something incredibly empowering, healing about somebody that has been a firefighter, police officer, or a military veteran, especially with combat deployments, sharing the smallest part of their story and having another Guardian say, “Me too!”

 To watch the look of relief, (because we're so worried we're going to be judged) when it’s realized you have somebody who has been there and understands because of their own experience, it creates this incredible healing which takes place. That's why I think it's so important and beautiful that Shannon worked so hard to get a veteran first responder on her staff. I get to participate in that experience when a first responder or veteran walks into my session room, it is very clear this is the space of somebody who has been in that environment. This is the space of somebody that is a guardian or has been a guardian themselves. I heard one of my new clients, who is a veteran, yesterday saying, “This feels like home.” When you walk into my session room, there is no denying it is not a normal therapist room.

They come into Erica's office to heal and it feels fantastic. She has all the badges on the wall. She's got her in her uniform, and it has special spiritual items too. It's very eccentric. Erica is a unicorn. It takes 7 years to get where Erica is; 5 years to become a Licensed Master social worker, and another 2 years for her clinicals.

Currently, Windmill Wellness Ranch is the only healing center I’m aware of that has a long time veteran first responders on staff. When clients come in and talk to me, I speak the language, I understand the culture. I think my connection with my own guardian past enables me to do that. There’s an instant feeling of comfort. Whether someone experienced these things as a veteran or first responder, recently or 20 years ago, the trauma is still very much alive. Being able to work through those traumas, process, and work through those stories, which are having a huge impact on their life today is important for them to be able to come in and feel that sense of comradery again.

When I'm out there in the community, it's hey brother, hey sister, because you are my brother, you are my sister, and I don't care if you were in law enforcement, or you were a firefighter 40 years ago. You are still my brother or sister. If you don't have a veteran or first responder program, you're still my brother or sister in recovery. It develops and facilitates a sense of family here.

There are many veterans on staff from administration to nursing. Most of our nurses still carry their veteran bags.

Jen

Great! With everything we see today with our police officers, our law enforcement and our first responders, do you see more people coming to your healing center now vs times in the past?

Shannon

There's a large influx. We're seeing first responders that don’t have the support of the communities they're serving. In my case, from the past, I didn’t have support from my department. I worked with somebody who was involved with the Dallas five; the five officers that were ambushed. I treated the individual. It creates a very deep moral injury when to an officer, they view themselves as, “I'm literally willing to lay down my life down for you and your videotaping my traffic stop or calling me this or saying that or you wish I was dead.”

 It's creating even deeper injuries and it's reducing the resiliency. Community support is huge in being able to get up, put that badge on, gun, and vest every day. When you're doing that, and you're getting called all kinds of derogatory names and assumptions are being made, these are things I dealt with minuscule back when I was active. It not reached the proportions it is today. It's absolutely having an effect and we're seeing that in the clients and their stories coming in. They're confused. They don't know how to process “I'm willing to lay my life down for this person and they hate me. They hate me.”

Shannon

There's so much hate out there. It's really impacted them. It's toxic. It absolutely is toxic.

Jen

It's devastating. I'm a survivor of armed robbery and abduction. I know two things. I'll never forget the 911 dispatcher who took my call. I had a lady having a seizure while we were stuck in the back room, and she walked me through helping her. And I will never forget the moment the police officers pushed open that door. I will never forget how I felt. If I had to call 911 and they said to me, “we're sorry. We don't have a police officer available right now.” I don't know what I would have done. We need our police officers. I'm telling you; don’t live in a world of thinking “well, it won't happen to me. I'll never have to call 911.” I didn't wake up that morning thinking I was going to go to work and deal with a robber and eight other people in the store with me. We need them!

Erika

We absolutely do. Our first responders, firefighters, police officers, dispatchers, paramedics, medics, and EMTs, for everything they do for their communities, they deserve respect. They deserve wellness. They absolutely deserve wellness. They've earned the right to be well, they fought the battles, they've confronted the demons. They absolutely deserve a safe, empathetic, and understanding space to heal their own wounds. And that's what we do here.

Jen

What we're trying to do with awareness now is to provide our law enforcement and first responders the resources they need, counseling, therapy, the ability to talk about it. You're supposed to be the protector, the strong ones, when after you see everything, you see day in and day out, you're still a human being too. You have emotions, you have family members. The conversation to provide help and resources is becoming more common. While Windmill Wellness Ranch is awesome, the goal is to be able to help all first responders before they must reach out for you.

Shannon

I agree. Watching my husband react after some of the events he went through, it came out sideways on us at home. The overprotectiveness of the kids because he had a similar event to Erika. It was coming out in a way that was not healthy. He was comfortable with seeing a therapist, and I'm glad he did. Keep in mind, if you've got a genetic predisposition, or he was in one of the other groups that went straight to the bar at night, it would have been a different story. If we can help them before it gets to that point, absolutely. I've heard time and time again,” I can't be helped. Nobody can help me. I'm too messed up.” We've had other brothers commit suicide. I've been to those funerals and to watch their kids bury their fathers. It’s hard and they need to know there is hope. There are others like them. We can help, even if they don't need the level of care Windmill Wellness Ranch offers. They call here and they're looking for the right therapist, the right connection, support group, we're going to help them get to where they need to get to.

Erika

I'm a human being. I'm always helping clients to live in the present. There is a part of me that wish’s a place like Windmill Wellness Ranch was in existence when I was in and out of treatment. I'm not saying that there aren't good treatment centers out there. There are. Most treatment centers, and there are others who treat first responders and have a first responder track, it’s provided by professionals who have some additional training in how to work with first responders. The difference is I have the additional training and I am that first responder, who by the way, grew up with an active military father who was Army.

There is something unique about this place. There is no judgment. We are brothers and sisters; we all work together. We have veterans, the owner is the spouse of a police officer, and I was a police officer for many years before coming here. You're comfortable, at least for a time becoming the helpee instead of the helper. That's what we struggle with. Typically, it's “I'm the helper, I'm not supposed to be the helpee.” What we don't realize is the damage that being the helper overtime creates. Windmill Wellness Ranch is a place where it is safe and okay to be the helpee. You've earned that right for treatment; you've earned the right to be well. We give veterans and first responders the absolute best opportunity to reconnect with life in a meaningful and joyous way.

Jen

How do you help families?

Shannon

The family program is every Saturday. They show up here on-site, or via zoom and be part of the experience. We do individual and family sessions when needed which is usually around week 3; we start doing more intensive family work. I know first responders have a different dynamic in their household. I know the level of perfectionism is different. The expectations are different and that can wear. Those things can wear into them having issues with addiction and or alcohol. I was a wife of a police officer, and I had my own battles with alcohol. We know the unique circumstances of either supporting or being on the other side where you are the one that needs help. We work very diligently with families because their support system need recovery too. That's where a lot of places missed the boat entirely. They have been living through hell, they felt helpless because they couldn't help their loved one. We've got to give them their own recovery. So, the first hour and a half of family program, is for the family; the client is not there. They are joined after. It's unique and different.

Jen

You are dog friendly?

Shannon

When I found out how many people wouldn't come to get well because they don't want to leave their animal at home, it broke my heart. I said, “we need to be open access to care.” Plus, I'm an animal lover, how can you not have animals around? I often watch the dogs get better too because they're just to being on high alert for their owners. It’s interesting to watch.

Erika

If you've got history of trauma, combined with a history of addiction, one may get to a point where that dog is all they have left. I can speak from experience, I stayed out of treatment on more than one occasion because I didn't want to leave my baby. I would tell you this is all I have left in the world, and you want me to just leave it in a kennel somewhere while I go off and get treatment. Nope! Anybody that understands when that's all you have left, you're not just going to leave it behind. You want that comfort, solace, and love with you.

We have the emotional support animals, and the dogs that are trained to detect trauma, etc. It's a beautiful thing to have that individual come in with their service animal and they learn how to be well together. That's huge. It really is.

Jen

That's a testament to Windmill Wellness Ranch because you listen to what people need and made the changes and adjustments so you could help more people. What other things have you changed or improved to be more inclusive based upon what you've heard from people saying, I need this?

Shannon

There are suggestion boxes everywhere. I either take care of them or they are assigned. We added an entire recovery coaching department; you get 2 sessions a week with your therapist and a session a week with a recovery coach. The recovery coach is taking care of the addiction stuff, while the therapist is focused on the heavy duty lifting.

I have a doctor that shows up on site twice a week who does something called neuro emotional technique. It wasn't until after Windmill was going that I knew we needed to add the EEG s to start seeing where the injury was. And then adding the treatment to help bring the brain back into balance.

All therapists are EMDR trained. We added the transitional housing about a year and a half after we were opened. We added an Activities Director to make sure they leave site once a week so they know they can have fun sober. We do bonfires when it's cold because so many people had a problem with alcohol while sitting at a bonfire. So now we do them without a beer in their hand. So, we're doing a little prolonged exposure therapy.

We have a hairstylist come in because you got to feel good. We have a massage therapist that comes in for those that are processing trauma. We're trying to kind of work it out of the body because in all reality, we were not good to our bodies when we were drinking or using. We have a chiropractor that comes on site. It is full service here. We are going to get to your body, mind, and spirit one way or another. I guarantee on the other end of this journey, people will finally have what I call that “full belly laugh”, where you cannot control yourself, and they find joy again.

Erika

If you're a family member, and you're watching somebody struggle, don't wait. There's the “opposite hope”, where we keep going to bed at night, hoping it's going to get better. When things have gotten to the point where you're like, should I do something? The answer is “yes!” We can help if anybody wants to call us and explain what the situation is. We can help guide them to the right place and get them in touch with somebody, so they know what to do next. It's not like we're put on this earth knowing what to do. How bad does it need to get before we do something? Reach out to us! We’ll let you know, but don't wait!

Jen

I want to give a big thank you Erika and Shannon with Windmill Wellness Ranch. I really appreciate you being my guests today.

[www.windmillwellnessranch.com](http://www.windmillwellnessranch.com)

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