Military OneSource Podcast — Warrior Games with Army Cpl. Tiffanie Johnson

Wounded Warrior Program

Episode transcript

Intro voiceover:

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Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast, I'm Bruce Moody. Our guest today is Tiffanie Johnson. As an army corporal, she was stationed in Korea when she was diagnosed with MS, multiple sclerosis. And we're going to talk with her today about her health journey, which included competing in the Warrior Games. But there's so much more to the story, so please stay with us. And Tiffanie Johnson, welcome to the podcast.

Tiffanie Johnson:

Thank you so much for having me, Bruce. How are you?

Bruce Moody:

I'm well. Just so thrilled to have you with us today and to really share your story because there's so much inspiration. Let's begin at the beginning here. When did you join the Army?

Tiffanie Johnson:

I joined July 26, 2017.

Bruce Moody:

What were your intentions? What MOS, as they say in the Army, what were you going to be?

Tiffanie Johnson:

So I ended up landing the dream job and the best, in my opinion, in the Army. I was a food inspector. I ended up meeting the head of the recruiter's office in my hometown. She looked at the list and she was like, "I have a friend who does this job." My recruiter was worried about my scores and didn't know if I would be a good fit for that job. And she looked at me and she goes, "Are you able to rise to the challenge for this job?" I told her, "Yes, I believe I can do it." So she was like, "Put her in now before someone snatches it." And she was like, "I didn't really get a chance to talk to you as much, but I have been listening to you from my office, and I really think you'll do great things in the Army." And so, my journey began right after that.

Bruce Moody:

And was Korea your first tour?

Tiffanie Johnson:

It was, yes.

Bruce Moody:

So now you're in Korea. What was life like at the time as you started to experience your first symptoms?

Tiffanie Johnson:

So when I first started experiencing symptoms, I actually didn't know that I had MS. I was traveling from North Carolina to South Korea, and on the flight there, I started to experience back pain. I just thought, "Oh, it's going to be a long flight. Maybe it's just from me sitting down." And so, I tried to get up, I tried to walk a little bit, but that wouldn't subside. And so, I just kind of held it out while I was on the plane. I didn't have any meds and I didn't think they carried Tylenol on the plane, so I just got around, tried to walk as much as possible, I tried to sleep. And my symptoms actually came gradually, which is a little scary, now that I think about it, about my onset. It kind of snuck up on me, if you will.

Bruce Moody:

What do you mean by that? Because you said it came up slowly but also snuck up on you?

Tiffanie Johnson:

Yeah, so the sneaking part was the back pain. So I had been having lower back pain here and there. I just thought it was something normal. But when I got off the plane, I noticed that there is this tingling, numbing sensation in my toes. And so, when I got to Camp Humphreys, which is where I was stationed at in Korea, we had roommates. And so, I had asked them, I think the second day that we were all there together, if they had any tingling in their feet because at that point it went from my toes to my feet. They were like, "Yeah, we've had that. Mine went away in two days." Somebody said, "Oh, yeah, I've had a little bit. It's off and on." And then someone said, "I had it the first day and now it's gone."

But I had noticed over time it went from my toes to then it was my whole foot and then gradually worked its way up to my waist. And so, during the nighttime, I had to use both of my hands to pick up my legs to get in the shower. So I started to think something's not right. But surprisingly, the next morning, I couldn't feel it. As far as the tingling sensation, it was no longer there.

So I went on about my day, but I noticed my balance was really off and there were these three small steps out from the barracks. We had to cross the street to go do our briefings. I stepped down on the first step and four soldiers had to catch me because I completely just lost my balance and could not feel my legs. And so, they helped me across the street. We couldn't miss the briefings, they're absolutely mandatory, but I needed to go to the hospital.

After we finished the briefings, I could feel my legs again and it was completely gone. So I said, "Okay, maybe I can make it through training, so I don't have to miss anything, and then I'll make an appointment as soon as I get to my unit." Well, I got a chance to go to my unit, got into my barracks, and I needed new PT shoes. So I went to the PX and while I was sitting there, the tingling, numbing sensation had came back, and it was more intense than usual.

So I sent a text to my dad. I say, "Dad, with a tingling, numbing sensation from my waist and then my feet and stuff, will it subside?" He said, "You need to go to the hospital right now. Your body is trying to tell you that something is wrong." And so, I was like, "Okay." It was the perfect timing.

I ended up walking from the PX to the barracks and it's like a block maybe from one another. So I get across the street and I notice as I'm walking, I am growing weaker and weaker in my legs. So I call a friend of mine and I say, "Hey, can you meet me halfway? I'm coming from the PX." I tell him where I'm at. I'm like, "I think there's something wrong, and I might not be able to walk in a few minutes." He ran all the way to me and just as soon as he grabbed me, I completely lost it. They had to get an ambulance, rushed me to the ER.

The ER had to send me off post to the Korean hospital, and they were like, "We need you to come back tomorrow because we don't see anything on your X-ray, so we're going to do an MRI on you." So I go back the next day and they do an MRI and they say, "Hey, something's wrong with your spine." And so, going from just tingling in the toes to, "Hey, there's something wrong with your spine," is what I mean by it gradually just progressed into something that I didn't think was anything serious.

Bruce Moody:

So it escalated quickly. Now, at what point did they come around to the diagnosis of MS?

Tiffanie Johnson:

So I actually didn't get my diagnosis until the next year.

Bruce Moody:

Are you still on active duty? Are you still in Korea while this is happening?

Tiffanie Johnson:

I am still active duty. So I do get hospitalized, after they take a look at the spine, have to reach out to a bunch of different departments. The neurologist admits me. I'm in the hospital for about two months. Then I get orders to come to Walter Reed, back to the United States, for a second opinion. So in 2022, on March 1, which is oddly my birthday month and also Multiple Sclerosis Awareness Month, my neurologist at Walter Reed called me and said, "Hey, I got some news for you. You do, in fact, have multiple sclerosis." And I was like, "Huh. Wow. Okay." I was shocked, to say the least.

Bruce Moody:

Forgive me, because I don't know the course of action one takes with such a diagnosis. So how did your life change at this point with this diagnosis?

Tiffanie Johnson:

Before I got the diagnosis, the for sure one, they had already suspected that I had MS, and so I had a lot of questions because I had no idea what MS was. When I found out that there wasn't a cure for MS and I started doing more research, before the official diagnosis, I was already pretty depressed about it. I was just thinking about my hopes and dreams. I came into the Army thinking that I guess what every soldier thinks to a certain degree, is that we can change the Army, we can make it better for our peers and for ourselves and the future generations to come.

I wanted to be the next surgeon general of the Army, and that was kind of taken away because you're a huge liability with this type of disease. You can't be in a position under high stress because you could relapse. I was pretty devastated. And then when I got the official diagnosis, because I'm not going to lie, I still had hope like, "Oh, it's probably something else. Maybe it'll be something with a cure." But the day that it was confirmed, I was kind of devastated. I didn't think I would be able to live a normal life or do the things that I do now.

Bruce Moody:

Understandable. This is a point in your life where life is moving forward at top speed, things are getting thrown at you, you're growing, you're experiencing things, you're overcoming challenges, you're making goals, you're surpassing them, you're just looking up and then this happens. I have to say that you were depressed. It's amazing because we've gotten to know you in preparing for this interview and you're just a real light in this conversation. You're just so effervescent. And I just wonder, was there something conscious that you did to bring your attitude around? What was your thought process?

Tiffanie Johnson:

I appreciate you saying that I'm very effervescent. I really appreciate that. I was while I was depressed also though. I'm happy all the time. I think being happy is my default. But honestly, I don't know if there's anything that I did per se, other than competing in adaptive sports. I think finding adaptive sports and just having that desire to still chase after my dreams.

I learned about the Army Recovery Care Program while I was at the Soldier Recovery Unit with Walter Reed, and that's how I found out about Warrior Games. And then also, I had a really good support system. My mom and my family, they saw how negatively it had an impact on me, but at the same token, my mom was like, "Well, your light never really goes out. It might be a little dim right now, but you'll snap back into it. Don't forget that as long as you have breath in your body, there's nothing that you can't do, especially with God behind you." So I think my mom was a huge factor in me being able to change my mindset and to remain as happy as you know me to be today.

Bruce Moody:

What did your mom say when you mentioned the Warrior Games to her?

Tiffanie Johnson:

She was excited. Her and my family were very supportive.

Bruce Moody:

For a lot of people who don't know, they may see the Warrior Games as people who have overcome their challenges, but actually the Warrior Games is really part of a person's recovery. A lot of these athletes are still going through a lot and will continue to after the games. So what did being in the Warrior Games mean to you?

Tiffanie Johnson:

It truly gave me hope. It made me realize that I may not be able to do the things that I'm used to, but adaptive sports show me that I can still do things, I just have to do them a little bit differently. It's wonderful that Warrior Games even exist because it gives veterans the opportunity to have that same enlightenment that I did, like, "Hey, I can still do track, I can still swim. I could still shoot with air rifle or archery." For me, it was the opportunity to showcase that even if you do have a disability or for those who have invisible disabilities, that you could still do all the things that you put your mind to. You just have to learn the new ways of doing them, if that makes sense.

Bruce Moody:

Of course. Now, and you had mentioned doing things, just doing them differently, so in this case, adaptive sports. What were the events that you've competed in?

Tiffanie Johnson:

For Warrior Games, I competed in shot put, discus, swimming, cycling, air rifle, powerlifting and seated volleyball.

Bruce Moody:

Oh, fantastic. I've been to the Invictus Games, and I've seen all of these events. It is amazing to watch.

Tiffanie Johnson:

Nice. I just did Invictus this September.

Bruce Moody:

Oh, fantastic. All right. The community of athletes is something that I'd like to hear you talk about. What it means to be surrounded by athletes who are helping each other out, encouraging each other, but at the same time competing against each other, how does that work?

Tiffanie Johnson:

Oh, it's so much fun. So the community is great. Our families typically bond instantaneously. So many of us, even if you're new to the Invictus family or Warrior Games, we all mesh pretty well. A lot of us have similar things in common, so that makes it quite easy, not just our service or disabilities. We are sports fans, we are athletes, so it's a lot of fun.

So for Warrior Games, competing against teams like Canada and teams like Ukraine, because they're not a part of our armed forces, they're our guests, and so it becomes super competitive when you have guests who you're competing with. And then the people who you're on the team with, so against other Team Army people.

For air rifle, it was down to me and Sergeant First Class Stacey Englert. She and I got to semifinals, and although we are both great shooters with air rifle, we really wanted the gold bad. So we hadn't won a gold for Team Army at this point. And I overcorrected my weapon in the middle of semifinals, and I'm not allowed to receive coaching. And so, I don't give up, but I keep trying to correct it, but I ended up being pushed out because you only have certain amount of seconds to shoot your target before the next round begins.

When she won first place, I was so ecstatic for her. I almost cried. Even though I was competing against her, you still want your teammates to do well. You still want to see Team Army or whomever your home team is to come out on top. So I hugged her for, I don't even know how long. It was a really long time. I was like, "I'm so freaking proud of you. You just did that. You just won the first gold for Team Army." And she was like, "It was supposed to be me and you. What'd you do?" And I was like, "I overcorrected my weapon, my bad."

Bruce Moody:

Do you keep in touch with the folks that you competed with?

Tiffanie Johnson:

Absolutely. They become family. And once you learn their stories and know their struggles, even before that, you connect and they're your family. You want to spend time with them, you call and check on them. We fly out to see one another or we'll make a road trip and we'll stop and see a couple of people together. And next thing you know, it's like six to 10 of us at a restaurant just hanging out. We've all just drove and bombarded somebody's restaurant like, "Hey, we need a table for this many people." And they're like, "Dang, y'all should have called ahead of time." But yeah, we do keep in touch.

Bruce Moody:

So they're very much a part of who you are and perhaps what I'm calling your health journey. They're very much a part of that it seems. When you talk about your experiences and your goals and what you're working against to other folks, how does that conversation go if you're trying to give someone hope, if you're trying to motivate someone to really look up, look forward, be optimistic and find solutions?

Tiffanie Johnson:

Generally, if I can encourage someone or even inspire any service member who struggles with a new diagnosis, a silent wound or any type of illness, I always try to advocate for the programs. Definitely seek help and utilize the programs afforded to us because they're definitely out there to help you. For the Army side, I always tell people about Army Recovery Care Program. They have so much to offer for the wounded, ill and injured soldiers through adaptive sports.

And there are many other, for lack of a better word, sister programs, just like ARCP, for other armed forces. We've worked with the Navy before, we worked with the Marine Corps before. Everybody has their own ARCP, it just may be called something different. Seek those out, for sure. And there's plenty of room in adaptive sports for anyone who's excited about getting into that. And even if it's not something that you want to do, maybe you might not be a sports type of person or you don't want to be an athlete, they still have something that they can offer.

Wounded Warrior Project, I absolutely love them. I'll probably end up talking about them a little later on, but I absolutely love it.

Bruce Moody:

Well, go for it now. Tell us about it now.

Tiffanie Johnson:

Okay, so Wounded Warrior Project is awesome. Active duty or veterans can get involved. Basically, they schedule all these different events for your wounded, ill, or injured service members. It's like pottery, you can do soldier rides, you can go on trips, they can go get you tickets to basketball games. They offer services for your family. Let's say if you need counseling, they can connect you with counseling. If you need help finding a house, then they can help you for that.

It's not necessarily like our stop for one source, it is just an additional extended branch of that. They've been around for years, they're absolutely amazing. You can invite your friends and family out to do things with you. I know I recently did a soldier ride last year with them, and I got a chance to meet the president, so that was cool.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah, why don't you talk about that. How did you end up meeting with President Biden?

Tiffanie Johnson:

So for training purposes, I found out that someone from ARCP had reached out to our program manager at the SRU and was like, "Hey, we have this cool opportunity for the soldiers at the recovery unit. We're doing a soldier ride with the Wounded Warrior Project, and if you know anybody that wants to do cycling, we're going to cycle around the DMV. We're going to stop and go to these really cool dinners and they're going to be able to meet special guests and it'll be a good time. So if you know anybody who wants to sign up, let us know."

Well, my NCO reached out to me. He goes, "Hey, you're supposed to be training for a cycling. A cycling is one of your sports for Warrior Games, right?" I go, "Yes, Sergeant." He says, "All right, cool. I think that this would be a really great opportunity." So I went ahead, I did it.

The first night there, we ended up meeting some of the members who are going to be sponsoring the ride. We did, I think 14 miles our first day and then 17 miles our second day. We did one where we did about 22 miles across Annandale, Virginia, and so that was cool. And then we get on the bus, we're getting ready to head out, and the members are saying like, "Hey, we have a surprise for everybody. We're headed to the White House." And so, we're like, "Oh, whoa, really?"

So the president himself was supposed to come out and hang out with us on our last ride, but he was unable to come due to, I think, a cycling injury that he had. And so, he invited us to the White House and we were able to ride a couple of times in their South Garden by this really pretty fountain where there were a bunch of red poppies. Anyway, he invited us to check out the White House during June, and we were riding in a circle. There was a bunch of paparazzi. He brought out the band and the orchestra for us. It was really cool.

So we got a chance to talk with him. He spent a little bit of time with us and we got to talk to him one-on-one. We met the vice president, Ms. Kamala Harris was there. And of course, the first lady, she was very sweet. We took pictures with them and he gave us a presidential coin. It was just extremely cool. I had never done anything like that before or even been to the White House, that was my first time.

But yeah, who would've known, right? Had I not done Warrior Games or not said yes, I wouldn't have been able to do that. So that was cool.

Bruce Moody:

How were these experiences shaping you? For example, what are you doing now and what sort of goals are you setting for yourself?

Tiffanie Johnson:

Right now, they are, I definitely want to become better at yoga. I am thinking of becoming a yoga teacher at some point. But ultimately, I'd like to continue doing adaptive sports. It's been my gateway to staying active, connecting more into my community, and also being able to just spread awareness as well about different disabilities, but especially silent disabilities like mine.

I would love to go forth and spread that message and also be a face that someone can relate to and reach out, or even someone that people with silent illnesses or just a disability in general can reach out to and talk to. I think that was probably the hardest thing for me when I first got diagnosed with MS. I wasn't able to relate to anyone else that I was seeing. Of course, there's people out there who do have MS, but there wasn't anyone around my age or someone that I could connect to. And so, hopefully, I can continue to speak out and inspire other people with disabilities to go out and do whatever it is that you want to do. Your disability is not you, you are not your disability. You can do whatever you set your mind to.

I am getting ready to train again for Warrior Games. I'll be competing again next year. And then hopefully in 2027, I'll also be doing Invictus Games as well. So I want to continue to compete. I'll probably do more 5Ks. I did my first one in New York with the Achilles International Foundation. It was phenomenal. I got a chance to meet wonderful, amazing athletes with other different types of disabilities from Columbia. I have been invited to Columbia to do more 5Ks or more events similar to that one.

But yeah, just to continue competing, continue being active and to continue advocating for not only veterans, but veterans with disabilities, anyone with a disability, but especially the silent disabilities because I don't think people talk about those as much.

Bruce Moody:

Tiffanie, it has been a real absolute pleasure to get to know you. And maybe as we wrap up our conversation, if you're going to talk to somebody who is just learning about their diagnosis and doesn't know what's ahead for them, what is your message to the people around them? How can the rest of us support someone with a silent disability?

Tiffanie Johnson:

To the person with a silent disability, do not compare your disability to anyone else's. Do not compare your experience to anyone else's. You have the right to feel how you're feeling about it. Do be gentle and kind to yourself. Be gentle with the people around you who may not understand your disability. But know that this may be the beginning of your disability and it might be a huge change to you, but it is not the end for you. You can still go out and do great things. Your dreams do not have to be put aside, you don't have to feel as though you're alone. I am here for you, and there are plenty of other people out in the community who may not be able to relate to exactly what you're going through, but they are there for you.

Talk to the people around you. Let them know what it is that you need. And if there's anything in your life that you feel like you can't do, I want to tell you, you can do it. Push that thought aside, throw it out the window. Do whatever you have to to overcome that thought because it is simply not true. You can do whatever it is that you put your mind to, and I am living proof of that.

To the people around a person with a silent disability, it is hard when you see your loved one suffering and you don't know how to help them. Listen to that person. Give them as many hugs as possible because loving on them honestly is healing, even if you don't have the right words to say.

And that person will tell you exactly what it is that they need and when they need it. Please, please, please be receptive to that. There's so many things maybe that they may not be able to communicate and they probably don't know how. Please be patient with them, give them the opportunity to work it out for themselves. I understand it could be frustrating if you're asking questions and you're not receiving the answers or maybe not clear answers, but understand that they may not have it all put together in words for themselves yet in order to communicate it with you. But in time, once they do figure out those words and they have the verbiage, they will communicate it.

So please just be patient and learn as much as you possibly can. Do research as well, in the event that maybe you don't understand something and you would like to ask questions to their doctors. They are a great resource, but it's really hard to know what questions to ask if you don't do your own research. So yeah, just be patient with one another, I would say.

Bruce Moody:

Good advice. Tiffanie Johnson, it has been such a pleasure to speak with you today. Thank you so much for joining us, and we hope to have you back on the podcast.

Tiffanie Johnson:

Thank you so much for having me, I really appreciate it. And I would love to come back. This was very fun, I've enjoyed myself.

Bruce Moody:

Good. You know where we are. Well, excellent. Want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We'd like to hear from you. We have a link in the program notes. Let us know your questions, your comments, maybe an idea for a future episode. And be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcasts because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life. I'm Bruce Moody, thank you for listening. Take care, bye-bye.