

The children of PTSD



By Elliot Ferguson, Kingston Whig-Standard
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Former Canadian soldier Louis Leconte and his daughters Jessica, left, and Patricia are featured in a documentary about the affect of PTSD on families. (Photo courtesy of Alexa-Frances Shaw)

A documentary film featuring Kingston area veterans is meant to show how post-traumatic stress disorder affects the people closest to them their children.

Soldiers' Children, by filmmaker Laura Sky, involved close to four years of research and interviews with families of reserve and regular Canadian Forces members and their families across the country.

"The kids have nothing to be ashamed of and they have a lot to be proud of, in terms of their own capacity to love their parents," Sky said.

"That duality is in every conversation."

About a decade ago, Sky made the documentary Crisis Call, which looked at police officers' interactions with people with psychiatric difficult

Her work on that film showed her how widespread PTSD and other operational stress injuries are among police officers.

Her interest in trauma suffered in the workplace led her to start working with Kingston psychiatrist Dr. Janet McCulloch, who works extensive with veterans with operational stress injuries.

At first, Sky said, connecting with veterans was difficult.

"I found it hard because they were so understandably angry. They felt so abandoned, and kind of used and forgotten," she said.

It was only when she asked the veterans about their children that she started to make a connection and found the subject of the film.

"The kids are invisible and we can help in bringing their voices forward," she said.

Because they are among the closest to people suffering from PTSD, children often suffer the brunt of the illness's symptoms.

Patricia Leconte said she and her older sister, Jessica, can remember their father losing his temper over small issues.

"He was very distant, he didn't talk much," Patricia Leconte said. "I remember my sister saying she would see him crying for no reason."

Initially, Patricia Leconte said, she was reluctant to talk on camera about her relationship with her father Louis, who served in the Canadian army and was diagnosed with PTSD from being deployed to Eritrea, Afghanistan and Haiti.

"At first I wasn't sure if I wanted to do it because I knew a lot of people would be watching it and it's not really a story that I share with a lot of people. It would be like letting people into my personal life," Patricia Leconte said.

She changed her mind when she realized her story could help other families cope with PTSD.

"I'd like to tell other families not to give up, because I feel some families tend to lose hope that their family will become normal again," she said.

"I'm not saying their families will become normal again, but it gets better over time. You just have to have faith and help one another."

The sisters' relationship with their father is better now, in part, because of his treatment for PTSD, and also because of the dialogue started by the documentary.

Taking part in the film also helped Patricia Leconte and her sister Jessica open up to each other and their father and learn more about each other.

"I didn't know he was suicidal at a point," Patricia Leconte said.

"It made me feel like I didn't know much. He keeps a lot to himself.

"When we watched the documentary after, it was different to see our dad's perspective and then him to see ours, how we see it."

Sky said she hopes the documentary helps families cope with PTSD and helps break down the stigma that can be as destructive as PTSD itself.

"I hope that it will show kids they have nothing to be ashamed of," Sky said. "I hope that it will bring them out of that lonely place. I hope that it will say the same thing to families, that you don't have to be isolated, that you are not alone."

A screening of Soldiers' Children is to be held at 2 p.m. on Sunday, Nov. 9, at the Portsmouth Olympic Harbour in Kingston.

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