

a place to heal

With the help of a special playground—one constructed with wounded soldiers in mind—Iraq War vet Jeremy Cabaniss and his family are finding their way to recovery.

BY VIRGINIA SOLE-SMITH • PHOTOGRAPHS BY JANE KORTRIGHT

IT WAS IN JULY 2006 that Deanna got the call that every military wife dreads. Her husband, Army Corporal Jeremy Cananiss, had been seriously wounded in Iraq when an improvised explosive device (IED) detonated next to the Humvee carrying his platoon and knocked him unconscious. Jeremy survived but suffered a traumatic brain injury (TBI). Deanna feared her husband would never be able to play with his sons again.

But just a few months later, on a warm afternoon at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, Jeremy, 25, was pushing his 5-month-old, Nolan, in a high-backed swing while Austin, his 9-year-old stepson, raced gleefully from a small rock-climbing wall to a green dinosaur-shaped slide.

This remarkable scene might not have taken place anywhere else. With its sturdy support handrails and wheelchair-accessible ramps in among all the bright colors and enticing

slides, the Boundless Playground at Fort Campbell is a refuge for injured soldiers and their families. Every design element and material has been carefully chosen with people like Jeremy in mind.

Jeremy's journey to get to that point was long and painful. Talking about the explosion, he says, "All I remember is glass shattering and someone trying to slap me awake." His shy Southern drawl is slower now that it takes him more time to find the right words. "When I woke up in the hospital in Iraq a few hours later, I knew I had to call Deanna myself so she would know I was alive." After a preliminary medical evaluation and a brief hospital stay in Germany, Jeremy was transferred to Fort Campbell for follow-up care and rehabilitation for his TBI—a term that covers everything from permanent, physically disabling injury to forgetfulness



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
Jeremy, Nolan, Austin and
Deanna Cabaniss on their
favorite slide; a helicopter on
the base; Jeremy and Austin
hang out; male bonding;
the playground's dedication;
Nolan as superhero.





FROM LEFT: Jeremy takes Nolan for a ride; Austin on the rock-climbing wall; Nolan masters his new skill—walking.



and minor speech impediments. In the meantime, 27-year-old Deanna shut down her housecleaning business in Panama City Beach, Florida, and packed up the boys to be with him.

They didn't know what to expect as they settled into their new community on the 100,000-acre military base. Located an hour outside of Nashville on the Tennessee-Kentucky border, Fort Campbell is home to nearly 175,000 residents, including members of the active and retired military and the Reserves, civilian support staff and their families. Jeremy didn't know it at the time, but he was especially fortunate to have been sent to Fort Campbell. Because there are several treatment facilities and hospitals nearby, it has the largest program for soldiers and family members with special needs of any military base, according to Denise Woody, former communications coordinator for Fort Campbell Family Housing (FCFH).

As it turned out, the base was good for Jeremy for another reason—the Boundless Playground. Three years ago, when FCFH began planning a new playground, it surveyed the community and learned that accessibility was an issue for returning wounded soldiers as well as for the base's special-needs

children. An equipment-sales rep mentioned the National Center for Boundless Playgrounds, a nonprofit organization that Amy Jaffe Barzach started in 1997—with a team of professionals and other parents—in memory of her baby boy, Jonathan, who died of

spinal muscular atrophy. Over the past 10 years, Boundless Playgrounds has helped communities build more than 120 playgrounds, all specially designed so that kids with and without disabilities can play together. But this was the first time that the organization had been called upon to help build one that would allow injured soldiers maximum access for playing with their children.

“The more we talked to the folks at Fort Campbell, the more we realized that kids wouldn't be the only ones to benefit,” says Barzach, whose organization is now receiving inquiries from military installations across the country. As the war in Iraq continues and the number of injured service members keeps growing—according to the Department of Defense, more than 13,000 have been wounded in action and are unable to return to duty as of April 2008—there is increasing public concern about how to help them get the follow-up care and rehabilitation they need. “These soldiers are coming home injured and wondering if they can still be Mom or Dad to their children,” says Barzach.

When the Boundless Playground opened at Fort Campbell in August 2006—the same month the Cabanisses moved into what would be their home

Show Your Support!

Here are 5 ways you can help the families of wounded soldiers:

- 1. Donate funds for a rental car or hotel room to a family visiting a soldier undergoing long-term rehabilitation at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center and Bethesda Naval Hospital in Washington, D.C.; yellowribbonfund.org.**
- 2. Give a laptop to a military hospital so that recovering soldiers can stay in touch with family and friends; laptopsforthewounded.com.**
- 3. Hire a returning soldier if you are an employer; hireahero.org.**
- 4. Offset the cost of activities, like dance lessons and Little League, for the children of deployed and severely injured National Guard and Reserve military personnel; ourmilitarykids.org.**
- 5. Send a veteran to a concert or sports event through Tickets for Troops, or opt for other ways to show your appreciation; thethankyoufoundation.org.**

for a year and a half—it was a huge hit. Adults and kids alike were thrilled. Support handrails and ramps allowed disabled soldiers to follow their children as they dashed from the puppet theater to the brightly colored sprinklers in the splash-park area. Moms and dads with walkers could sit on gently wobbling pods that helped them work on their balance while they kept an eye on their kids. There were even long-handled shovels in the sandbox that parents in wheelchairs could use to dig side by side with their little ones.

Though the playground was just a few short blocks from the Cabanisses' house, Jeremy was initially hesitant to try it out. "When I first got home, I wanted to stay in bed all day," he says. The soldier's depression over his injury was compounded by concerns about whether he could be a good dad to his boys. The trauma to his brain had caused memory lapses, migraines and seizures, as well as shaky balance and poor hand-eye coordination that made it hard for him to do everyday activities like playing catch with Austin. "He worried that he wasn't doing all that he should," says Deanna.

Austin too was having difficulty with the transition. "He was so excited for Jeremy to come home that it was hard for him to understand about the injury," Deanna remembers. "Since Jeremy's condition isn't physically obvious, it was tough to explain to Austin why we had to cancel plans to do something fun when his dad didn't feel well." And that happened often as the family learned they could never predict how Jeremy would feel from one day to the next. "There were many days when we just couldn't leave the house," Deanna says.

But soon after the playground opened, Deanna began to urge her husband to go out for short walks after dinner: "I thought it would be therapeutic for him to play with the children." When Deanna saw Jeremy letting himself be



“The playground lets soldiers and their families do all the things they used to do together.”

pulled around by an excited Austin, she knew her intuition had been right. Jeremy, who sometimes still uses a cane for balance, found the ramps and rubberized turf easier to navigate than the steps and gravel found in most other playgrounds. "I realized I had to get out there and work at getting better," he says. "We took the boys down to play almost every day."

The playground's benefits go beyond its accessibility. "It's a place where the soldiers and their families can forget the uncertainty that lies ahead and do all the things they used to do together," says Barzach. For the Cabanisses, that meant seeing baby Nolan take his first steps on the soft turf. And, as Jeremy explains, pushing Nolan on the infant

swing while keeping an eye on Austin on the rock wall not only improved his hand-eye coordination but also helped him "take my mind off things." The family spent many evenings at the playground, unwinding with neighbors after long days of driving to and from Nashville for four-hour therapy sessions.

In November 2007, the family moved back to their home in Panama City Beach to be closer to Deanna's family. They have paid off their mortgage with the generous fund-raising efforts of their community, and Jeremy accepted medical retirement from the Army. He continues to receive regular treatment for his injuries from the VA Hospital in Pensacola, Florida.

There's no question that the Cabanisses have a long road ahead of them as they figure out the next stage of their young lives. "I'd like to go to college and get a degree in criminal justice," says Jeremy. "But that's a ways off because I have to wait for my cognitive function to improve." No one can say how long this may take—Jeremy remains on multiple medications to help him manage his symptoms. Deanna, who worries about making ends meet on Jeremy's pension, recently started nursing school with plans to become an RN. But no matter what the future holds, the playground at Fort Campbell helped Deanna and Jeremy discover that they didn't need to put down deep roots to find a community and feel like a family again. All they needed was a cheerful red ramp that took everyone to the top of a green dinosaur slide.

Virginia Sole-Smith has written for Good Housekeeping and the New York Times.

Find Out More

To learn how you can help build or volunteer at a Boundless Playground near you, go to boundlessplaygrounds.org.