Marine Corps helicopter pilot John Ruocco had just returned home to Newbury after 75 harrowing combat missions while deployed in Iraq. He was distant, anxious, and irritable in the short time he had with his wife and two young boys. The war would not leave him.

The challenges have been many for Kim Ruocco after her husband, Marine Corps pilot John Ruocco, died by suicide after returning from Iraq.

By Brian MacQuarrie
“I saw the face of evil over there,” Ruocco told his wife, Kim. “It’s part of me now.”

He soon returned to his base in California, and the warning signs kept flashing. After one alarming phone call, Kim Ruocco booked a red-eye to the West Coast, only to arrive at her husband’s room to see another Marine leave in tears.

When the Marine saw her, he blocked the door and then carried her away after she collapsed. Major John Ruocco, 40, had hanged himself.

That terrible day in 2005 changed Kim Ruocco forever, casting her into debilitating grief that eventually forged a newfound purpose — to heal the loved ones of veterans and active-duty service members who take their lives.

Today, Ruocco helps lead a national group that has partnered with Home Base, a Boston-based clinic whose broad mission includes intensive care for the spouses of veterans who die by suicide, a program believed to be the only one of its kind in the country.

“I knew I couldn’t be the only one having this experience, and that we had to figure out a way to get to these survivors early,” Ruocco recalled. “We have this extraordinary amount of trauma.”

Home Base, a collaboration between Massachusetts General Hospital and the Red Sox Foundation, last month completed its third, two-week clinical session for the widows of suicide victims. The program is free of charge.

“It’s the biggest gift they can imagine,” said Ruocco, who is vice president of the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors, a nonprofit organization based in Washington that refers spouses to Home Base.
Suicide rates among young military veterans, many of whom have battled post-traumatic stress disorder after repeated tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, have surged to alarming levels. Between 2005 and 2016, the suicide rate among veterans younger than 34 rose about 80 percent, by far the largest increase of any age group tracked by the US Department of Veterans Affairs.

Overall, 7,298 current and former service members died by suicide in 2016, making veterans roughly 1.5 times more likely to lose their lives by suicide than non-veterans, according to the VA.

“The rate of exposure to trauma, among young veterans in particular, is a factor in the development of PTSD, depression, and substance abuse,” said Dr. John Bradley, chief of psychiatry for the VA Boston Healthcare System.

The VA considers suicide prevention its highest clinical priority, said Bradley, a retired Army colonel.

At Home Base, eight spouses at a time have received individual and group therapy, as well as sessions such as fitness and nutrition coaching that are designed to bolster physical well-
being in addition to mental health.

Round-trip air fare, hotel lodging, and meals are covered by Home Base, whose executive director, retired Army Brigadier General Jack Hammond, suggested a partnership after Ruocco described the scope of the trauma she was seeing.

The early results have been encouraging. For one graduate, Lynnette Brown of Wichita, the therapy and shared experiences have been life-altering.

“They gave me tools to deal with a lot of my feelings — the anxiety, the nightmares,” said Brown, whose husband died by suicide in 2016. “But the biggest thing was being able to connect with other women who have had similar situations.”

Brown’s husband, Craig, served as an Air Force crew chief for F-16 fighter jets. She initially coped with his death by masking her emotions, and she declined an invitation to join an early gathering of the program.

“I said, ‘No, I’m good to go. I don’t need any help. I’m fine,’ ” Brown recalled.

The next time she was invited, Brown knew better and accepted.

“I was tired of wearing that mask, and I needed help taking it off,” she said. “It’s helped me to sit back and breathe and be in the moment, instead of being in the emotional.”

Bonnie Ohye, a psychologist who directs family programs at Home Base, said that working with these spouses — all of whom either witnessed the suicide or discovered their loved one’s body — has been deeply fulfilling.

“Some seem so joyless” when they arrive for sessions on the Charlestown waterfront, Ohye said. “But at the end, they seem lighter and have recovered a sense of being able to laugh and enjoy one another. It has been really remarkable.”

Ohye said the Home Base program is unique in mixing clinical treatment for post-traumatic stress with help for “complicated grief,” a condition that does not proceed through the normal stages of recovery.
“They do not have to ignore the past, but it doesn’t have to define them any longer,” Ohye said.

The hope is to expand with sessions geared solely toward parents and children of suicide victims. For now, Ohye said, Home Base is learning what works and following up once the spouses leave Boston.

Brown said Home Base connected her with two counselors back home, and that she speaks regularly with other women from her program.

“We now have this amazing support group,” Brown said.

The after-care network is “literally saving lives,” said Ruocco, who travels the country raising awareness about suicides among veterans and active-duty service members.

She knows the pain these widows feel — drawing upon a lonely, reclusive life after her husband’s suicide, when she lowered the blinds in her home, overwhelmed “with guilt and shame and lies and trauma.”

Ruocco initially followed a social worker’s advice and told her two boys, 10 and 8, that their father had died in an accident. But one day, while riding with the family on Interstate 95, one of the children suddenly said he felt responsible for his father’s death.

Horrified, Ruocco pulled the car into the breakdown lane, held her boys close in the back seat, and told them the truth.

“We rebuilt our family starting that day,” Ruocco said. “I’m now living a life with a meaning and purpose.”

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