Voices of PVA — E05 — Adaptive Sports, Community and the Veterans Career Program, with Keelan Zenion

[0:00] AL KOVACH JR.:
Welcome to Voices of PVA, the podcast of Paralyzed Veterans of America. I'm Al Kovach.

[0:06] CHAD STEWART:
And I'm Chad Stewart. Today's guest is a great example of what can happen when a veteran gets connected with the right people at the right time.

[0:13] AL KOVACH JR.:
He sure is. Keelan Zenion is a 30 year old Navy veteran who served from 2014 to 2018. But in September of 2023, a car accident left him with a spinal cord injury. Since then, he's found his way back through adaptive sports, earning a bronze and gold medal at the National Veteran Wheelchair Games. And he now serves on the board of directors for Paralyzed Veterans of America's New England chapter.

[0:37] CHAD STEWART:
Keelan also worked with PVA's Veterans Career Program, which helped him with employment and with keeping his career goals on track. We'll be talking about what that experience looked like and what it could mean for you.

[0:48] AL KOVACH JR.:
So let's get into it. Keelan, welcome to Voices of PVA. You served in the Navy from 2014 to 2018. What drew you to the Navy and what exactly was your role there?

[1:03] KEELAN ZENION:
I was an aviation support equipment technician working on the tractors on the flight deck and flight line. I've always had a fascination with aviation. In 2014, my dad had told me to talk to the army recruiter, take the ASVAB at a county fair. I went and I took the ASVAB with them and then I went to the Air Force and that recruiter told me with a 61, I should probably join the Army. That's kind of what led me to the Navy.

[1:35] AL KOVACH JR.:
That's funny. So from that job, what exactly do you think you learned from your service? What do you think has shaped you into what you are today?

[1:45] KEELAN ZENION:
The attention to detail that the aviation industry, specifically in the Navy, dictates on everything. Like with the FOD, foreign object, debris or damage. I've heard it described as both. But it's debris that causes the damage, just FOD. I've taken that into all aspects of my life.

[2:07] AL KOVACH JR.:

I kind of know what FOD is. You know, I have a six year old and a seven year old and there's lots of FOD all over my house. So five years later, September of 2023, you were in a car accident which resulted in a spinal cord injury. I'm shocked to hear that you were in a coma for 11 days. What were those first days like when you woke up?

[2:26] KEELAN ZENION:
I had a plethora of injuries and my memory's not too great as far as immediately after my coma being in the ICU, I spent want to say it was 20 or 30 something days in the ICU. And then from there I was discharged to Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital for another month. I wasn't able to drink water or talk or do much. So from mid September till about October 3, which is my mom's birthday, that was the first time I asked her what happened. Obviously I mouthed it because I wasn't able to speak.

[3:09] AL KOVACH JR.:
So, I mean, you were in a hospital that did not have a spinal cord injury center. How did you end up in the VA Spinal Cord Injury Center?

[3:15] KEELAN ZENION:
My car accident happened in Middleborough, Massachusetts. They said it was going to take over an hour for the Med flight. So they drove me to Good Samaritan in Brockton, Mass. And from there I was med flighted to Boston Medical. Boston Medical had suggested that Spaulding was the best place for me to go, so I got discharged to Spaulding. Luckily for me, the doctor at Spaulding had just been hired at Spaulding from interning at the West Roxbury VA up in Boston. He found out I was a veteran and had me discharged and sent there.

[3:50] AL KOVACH JR.:
That's great to have a doctor advocate on your behalf like that. So you were bounced around from hospital to hospital and you finally ended up at the Spinal Cord Injury Center. What was going through your mind? Like, when did you first really get a good grasp of what was going on?

[4:03] KEELAN ZENION:
At Spaulding, I remember my mom had said that there was a student that attended her school that had sustained a spinal cord injury shortly after graduating. And she was like, she's going to come into your hospital room and meet you and tell you all of the stuff about adaptive sports. And I was like, I'm all set. She's like, why? I was like, I don't need to talk to anyone in a wheelchair. I'm just going to walk out of the hospital. I'll be all right.

[4:32] AL KOVACH JR.:
Yeah, maybe a little too soon for that kind of talk. I imagine we're all in denial for a little while that we're going to shake it off and walk out the hospital.

[4:41] CHAD STEWART:
Keelan, when did you first hear about PVA and what made you decide to become a member?

[4:46] KEELAN ZENION:
When I was inpatient at West Roxbury, I was extremely fortunate to have a board member who comes to the West Roxbury VA fairly frequently, representing the PVA with a polo on and talking up the PVA and talking about the adaptive sports and stuff that they're involved with. And he gave me a PN, Paraplegic News. It happened to be on motors and automotive stuff and I'm a bit of a gearhead, so I was infatuated with it. Then when I went to go in to do my disability claim looking for, is it a NSO or vso?

[5:32] CHAD STEWART:
National Service Officer? Yeah, nso.

[5:34] KEELAN ZENION:
They had suggested that I use Zachary Knudsel, the NSO for the PVA. And when he came to my house to help me sign up for the PVA, that was December of 24.

[5:51] CHAD STEWART:
I know Zach. I worked with Zach for a story a while back and he is, I think, a Marine veteran. And just to clarify, Zach is not our only NSO. We think have 50 or 60 NSO spread across the country. So you mentioned it earlier. A little bit. But you got involved in adaptive sports as soon as you were medically cleared. What has that opened up for you being involved in athletics again?

[6:14] KEELAN ZENION:
It's kind of a funny story because I went from the Spaulding Hospital with my plethora of broken bones. They didn't have me do any rec therapy or anything like that. And then I went to the West Roxbury VA and they were introducing me to slower sports or safer sports. Then when I got discharged from the va, I followed what I was being led to and I went to the summer sports clinic immediately and then the winter sports clinic where coincidentally, my PCP at the time removed my medical clearance. So she was like, have fun. This is the last one with the VA for a while. But that particular one, I wound up with a roommate who, who was on the board of the New England PVA. That's the start of how I got invited to being on the board and wound up serving on the board for the PVA New England chapter.

[7:18] CHAD STEWART:
What were some of those initial sports that you said are a little like safer and not as aggressive? What were those early sports you started with?

[7:26] KEELAN ZENION:
The first one I can think of is power soccer.

[7:29] CHAD STEWART:
That's. I wouldn't call it safe. I was thinking you were going to say like bocce or something like that.

[7:35] KEELAN ZENION:
Well, I just mean safer and like it's not as physical.

[7:39] CHAD STEWART:
Is not rugby

[7:39] KEELAN ZENION:
like wheelchair basketball? All that stuff? You're gonna have contact. And I feel that the way that they make power soccer safe is that they're strict on the two on one rules and they kind of keep spacing well coordinated.

[7:56] CHAD STEWART:
And what do you play now? I know you play basketball. Is that your main sport or are there other things you do as well?

[8:02] KEELAN ZENION:
Another thing, it's kind of a funny story. I wound up losing my medical clearance in January of 25. Then I started looking for Adaptive sports real hard. And I wound up with wheelchair football in June of 25. One of the things the doctor had advised was that he was really hung up on I can't go kayaking and I shouldn't go flying. So naturally, I did the only sensible thing and I flew all over the country playing football. He didn't say anything about playing football.

[8:35] CHAD STEWART:
Oh, my goodness. Yeah. So you go and do probably the sport with the most contact after not being medically cleared. What do you tell a veteran who's newly injured and unsure where to turn?

[8:48] KEELAN ZENION:
I talk about programs that nationals has, that PVA Nationals has, like the veteran wheelchair games. I talk about things that the local chapter level has. Like we have, coincidentally, a power soccer event coming up on November 20th. Then we turn right around and go right into Boccia. December 5th and 6th, and then August last year and September this year we had the summer banquet. It's kind of like a cookout, a party for our members celebration. So I invite people to that.

[9:26] CHAD STEWART:
So what I'm hearing is what you're really doing is inviting somebody who's newly injured to be part of a community that they probably didn't know existed before their injury. Is that correct?

[9:35] KEELAN ZENION:
Yes. I just went into West Roxbury indus this past December, and I wound up with a roommate who had a higher level injury than me. So I started looking for adaptive sports that he could participate in. And that's kind of to go full circle brought me into power soccer. I just think power soccer is a great opportunity because you can grab the veterans with higher level injuries and

then you can grab the para athletes who are aging out of their sport. I mean, aging out as in like their shoulders cannot push a wheelchair the way they used to or what have you.

[10:18] AL KOVACH JR.:
I remember how sports really helped me get back engaged in life. So did employment. And I want to get on my soapbox here for a little bit. I got injured 35 years ago, and the first thing I want to do is go back to work. Not because I need the money, but because I kind of wanted to prove to everybody that I still had something to contribute. But if it's one thing I've learned is that I believe that a person's worth has absolutely nothing to do with how much money they earn or how much they pay in taxes or how independent they live their days. But our society seems to be increasingly seem to measure people by what they produce or contribute economically. And for those of us living with spinal cord injuries, that can be troubling because I know potential employers look at us and think, you know, they see the guy in the wheelchair and they think, what can he do for me? With that being said, you were already working part time when you connected with PVA's Veterans Career Program. What were your biggest questions and hurdles around work at that point, like getting an adaptive vehicle or making sure your office was going to be accessible and having to deal with all the questions from your fellow employees about how you got hurt. Can you kind of walk us through that?

[11:24] KEELAN ZENION:
I was struggling with trying to figure out how I was going to get the lessons for driving with hand controls and figuring out where to go to get them installed. Once you get the lessons completed, then I was also trying to figure out what kind of modifications it's reasonable, the reasonable expectations to have for having your employer implement for you. So I received great guidance from a woman named Danielle Hitu, who is local to me.

[11:59] AL KOVACH JR.:
How exactly did you first connect with the Veterans Career Program and what was that conversation like?

[12:04] KEELAN ZENION:
I love this story. Like I said, I spoke with Zachary Knutsel. He helped me fill out my application to become a PVA member. And I don't want to say, maybe a month later, I received the box with the hat and the bumper sticker and a couple other things and saw the bumper sticker, and I was like, you know, just put this on my wheelchair, because I don't like bumper stickers on my car. But I figured if I'm in my wheelchair and somebody sees it, I don't really care if they know it's me because I'll be in my wheelchair. So that's fine. So I threw it on the back. And the next day I was at a grocery store with my mom, and Danielle came up to me and asked me if I was a member of the PVA. I got a little standoffish because I didn't think it was an appropriate question. And then she reminded me, I'm a proud member of the PVA on the back of my wheelchair. So that's how we established our connection.

[13:04] AL KOVACH JR.:

That's hilarious. So looking back at your time working with the Veterans Career Program, what's the most important benefit you think you got out of it?

[13:11] KEELAN ZENION:
Danielle has been a huge help for me with redesigning my resume because when I first left the va, I worked with a VOC rehabilitation specialist out of the va. He, like, was obsessed with making sure that my resume. I want to say he was obsessed with one page. So he cut it down to one page, got me the job that I'm currently in, but I've been working with Danielle on bolstering my resume to seek employment elsewhere.

[13:46] AL KOVACH JR.:
If you're talking to a veteran who already has a job, how do you think they could benefit from going through the Veteran Career Program despite the fact they already have a job? I mean, how could that help them?

[13:55] KEELAN ZENION:
I think that the Veteran Career Program is fantastic. They can help you revamp your resume and prepare you for your next job, assuming that you may need assistance. They're also a great resource outside of just looking at future employment. I'm on Social Security Disability Insurance, SSDI. She's helped me with figuring out the math and everything to make sure that I don't go over in excess and lose that benefit. So she's helped me in that aspect as well.

[14:33] AL KOVACH JR.:
Yeah, that's the weird, I guess you call it the Social Security Disability Insurance paradox is that you're given just enough money to get by, but when you go back to work, you lose it. And so you take a big hit when you have to go back to work. And you just kind of want to ask yourself, does it really make sense for me to go back to work if I'm going to lose all the Social Security benefits? But I'm glad you have your mom around to help you figure that out because it can be real challenging. So beyond the practical help, how do you think the Veteran Career Program has helped shape the way that you see your future?

[15:05] KEELAN ZENION:
Working with Danielle, she's introduced me to a couple of different avenues to look into things. What is it? Choice paralysis? I think I find myself struggling with that a little bit because as we were talking with before this call, I was telling you, like, I'm not sure whether I'm going into banking or. Or if I'm going into the nonprofit sector, because they're not exactly the same.

[15:31] AL KOVACH JR.:
Well, you know, PVA prides itself in saying that we're partners for life and you can chase down a career and if you don't like it, you can always go back to the Veteran Career Program and kind of rewrite your resume and try something different. Because you're right, your two primary choices of careers are very different.

[15:50] CHAD STEWART:

Just want to add real quick, Al, that the Veterans Career Program is not just for paralyzed veterans. It's assistance open to all veterans service members transitioning out of the military, spouses and caregivers. So you don't have to have a spinal cord injury or disease to take advantage of PVA's Veterans Career Program. And that's something I think a lot of people don't know and something we want to get out there in case some of our audience members are veterans who aren't in wheelchairs or have spinal cord diseases. Anyway, moving on to looking ahead. You're now a board member of PVA's New England chapter. What motivated you to step into that role?

[16:30] KEELAN ZENION:
I wound up with a roommate at the New England Winter Sports Clinic who I think what sparked the conversation was my PVA bumper sticker on the back of my wheelchair and he asked me if I'd ever thought about serving on the board. And at the time I didn't know anything about it. So I offered to volunteer to help. And being on the board, I've recently accepted an assistant sports director role with the New England PVA. I think it's kind of a common thread in my life that it was destiny where I was headed.

[17:07] AL KOVACH JR.:
Who knew a bumper sticker could open so many doors for you?

[17:10] CHAD STEWART:
Keelan, what would you say to a veteran or caregiver listening who's wondering whether the Veterans Career Program could help them?

[17:16] KEELAN ZENION:
I think that if you're a veteran or a caregiver for veteran, you should look into the Veterans Career Program because they are so willing to help and they cover so many different things. Like I've had questions regarding a cousin of mine who is not a veteran and the people I've worked with the Veterans Career Program have offered advice and stuff for them regardless of veteran status and with or without the paralyzed part, they're able to offer assistance and advice.

[17:58] AL KOVACH JR.:
I do want to emphasize that you're right about the Veterans Career Program and PVA in whole that they don't just support the veteran regardless of service connection or not, but also they help their entire family because as they say, when the tide rises, all boats float. And especially with the veteran who has a catastrophic injury like a spinal cord injury, usually it's their family or the people that are closest to them that are trying to support them. And finding employment certainly helps with the household income.

[18:25] CHAD STEWART:
Keelan, thank you for being here and for sharing your story so openly.

[18:29] KEELAN ZENION:

Absolutely. Thank you guys for having me for this.

[18:33] AL KOVACH JR.:
From the Navy to a life changing injury, to the medals and the Board of Directors, your road back is a powerful one and it's going to resonate with a lot of our veterans listening here today.

[18:43] CHAD STEWART:
If you're a veteran, caregiver or military spouse who wants to learn more about PVA's Veteran Career Program or any of the other ways PVA supports veterans with spinal cord injuries and diseases, visit pva.org

[18:55] AL KOVACH JR.:
and if you like this episode, please subscribe Leave us a review and share it with a fellow veteran who might need to hear it. Until next time, I'm Al Kovach.

[19:04] CHAD STEWART:
And I'm Chad Stewart. Thanks for listening to Voices of PVA.