**Motivational Mondays interview:**

**Jake Wood – *Airing* 02.15.2021**

**Music intro** [00:00:00-00:00:01]

**Max Irzhak** [00:00:02] Welcome ladies and gentlemen to Motivational Mondays.

I’m your host Max Irzhak, and joining us today is Jake Wood, the CEO of Team Rubicon, a nationwide nonprofit providing military veterans the opportunity to continue their service by responding to natural disasters around the world.

Jake, thank you for being here, it’s an honor having you with us today!

**Jake Wood** [00:00:21] Yeah, it’s good to be here, Max, thanks for having me.

**Max Irzhak** [00:00:23] So today, Team Rubicon has close to 130,000 volunteers across the United States.

I’m blown away by what your team has accomplished. Can you tell us about the origin story? And what made you want to start this organization?

**Jake Wood** [00:00:36] The organization started about 11 years ago. I had just gotten out of the Marine Corp in late 2009, and in January 2010 the Haiti earthquake happened. And as I was watching that situation unfold, I felt compelled to do something. Again, you know I had just gotten out of the Marine Corp, i had served in Iraq and Afghanistan—I was in the infantry, so i was fairly comfortable in tough environments, and working in chaotic situations. And so, watching that disaster and that earthquake unfold, i really just wanted to help.

And so, i called a couple of organization who i knew were responding down there, and tried to volunteer with them. And none of them would give me the opportunity to go down and help, so instead of just sitting back and texting ten dollars, I called a couple of Marines I served with, a couple of old buddies, and we got together a team of 8 people—veterans and some doctors. And we got down to Heiti about four days after the earthquake. And for the next three weeks, the team rapidly grew, we were running these mobile medical triage clinics all throughout the city. And really just repurposing the skills and experiences that we gained from the military to help these people.

And it dawned on us that, you know, everything that we’d been taught in the Marine Corp, everything that we experienced overseas made us more effective in disaster zones. And so we came back from that disaster and we incorporated as a non-profit organization. So this is early 2010, and we set out to build the best disaster response organization in the world.

**Max Irzhak** [00:02:18] We have a lot of men and women who have previously served in the military and are continuing their leadership training through the NSLS program.

As a veteran, can you share with us what the military taught you about leadership, and how you’ve applied those skills throughout your life?

**Jake Wood** [00:02:32] I think that one of the most important lessons in leadership that i learned in the Marine Corp, in Iraq, my first tour, was that leadership at its core is nothing more than love. It’s loving the people that you lead, it’s being able to demonstrate to them that you care about who they are, where they come from, why they are there following you in that moment in time. And just as important, where they want to go in their life. And demonstrating to them how you’re going to play a role, and do everything you can to help them achieve their dreams and their goals.

And that’s an exhausting thing to do. And a lot of people try to mail it in on that. Some people they may buy into it, they may not. Some of the people who do buy into it, still they dont have the energy or the willingness to actually demonstrate that type of true passion for the people that they lead. But people that you lead, they deserve that, right? They spend these hours with you, they’re putting their livelihoods, or sometimes their lives in your hands, they deserve it. And the thing that i realized in Iraq was that there are some interesting things that happen when you lead with love first. The first thing is that people feel safe. And it’s interesting that I learned that on the battlefield where there literally was almost no sense of safety. But safety’s relative, and it goes beyond just physical safety, you know… there’s a psychological and an emotional safety that you need to provide for your people. And when i talk about it that way, im not talking about creating a cocoon for people, or creating safe spaces where you cant talk about hard things—im talking about where people feel like they’re going to be taken care of. And what happens when you create that sense of safety is that’s where you find courage. You know, people become courageous when they think you have their back. And so, you know, I tell people that all the time—courage on the battlefield is born from this relative sense of safety. It’s usually not physical, because they’re either usually being courageous because they're in great mortal danger or somebody else is, but they feel psychologically and emotionally safe because they know if they go down on that field, there’s going to be a dozen Marines that are going to line up and go after them to bring them back. And that makes them feel relatively safe, and that ultimately is born of the love that Marines or soldiers, or sailors have for one another. And that comes from the leader.

**Max Irzhak** [00:04:48] In 2020, most of our lives were flipped upside down. Businesses shuttered, stay-at-home orders were issued, unemployment jumped to an all-time high.

People simply didn’t know how to *deal* with this invisible threat, and mental health quickly became a very hot topic.

What advice do you have for ordinary civilians and veterans alike, for dealing with these uncertain times? What steps can we take to stay on top of our mental health?

**Jake Wood** [00:05:13] Yeah, mental health is so so important. And there’s a lot that has been challenging over the last year with the pandemic. People are finding themselves locked inside, they’re finding themselves isolated from family, from friends. They find themselves disconnected from work. I think a lot of people before the pandemic thought it would be really cool to work from home every day, and i think a lot of people—and i know this, i don't think—because i run a company with 200 employees—a lot of people have found out that working from home isn’t as great as you think. People underestimate the positive psychological benefits of being around other human beings throughout the day.

So what can people do? Don't stay locked inside. Get outside to the extent you can. I know if you’re in Northern Minnesota right now you might be chuckling and saying “yeah right, i'm not going to be spending a lot of time outside. It’s minus ten degrees.” But to the extent you can, get fresh air and get some sunshine on your face—that’s kind of step number one. Take care of your body physically. It’s amazing the impact that physical health has on our mental health. So do those two things, you can completely control them.

Take advantage of technology and stay connected to your peers, your friends, your family via things like Zoom. I do think it’s really important for us to maintain safe physical distancing until we’re on the other side of this pandemic. But to the extent that you can create a pod, safely, and ensure the safety of everybody within it—there’s some value in doing that. We have to balance complete and pure isolation with of course the downside impacts that come of that. But there’s a right way to do that, and a wrong way to do that.

And then finally, don’t be afraid to talk about it. Be vulnerable. Reach out to someone and, you know, if you’re having a challenge don't be afraid to share it. Getting those things off your chest is perhaps one of the most valuable things that you can do.

**Max Irzhak** [00:07:06] Let’s see if we can share some quick practical advice for our listeners.

When you set a goal, how do you stay the course and not stray at the first sign of trouble?

**Jake Wood** [00:07:15] Surround yourself with people who are going to hold you accountable.

**Max Irzhak** [00:07:20] What are the skills people need to train themselves-on to become effective leaders?

**Jake Wood** [00:07:24] They’re not skills, they’re attitudes. Have initiative, be tenacious, and always be enthusiastic.

**Max Irzhak** [00:07:32] What advice do you have for soldiers just getting out of the military and going back to civilian life?

**Jake Wood** [00:07:38] Realize that your military experiences made you stronger and more capable, and has not left you broken.

**Max Irzhak** [00:07:42] I’ve had the pleasure of interviewing a lot of amazing leaders on this show.

And the common theme i keep seeing time-and-time again is that following your passion seems to be one of the cornerstones for a life well-lived.

This is *clearly* true in your case. Do you recommend people follow their passion when trying to figure out what to do after college?

**Jake Wood** [00:08:02] You know, cliches exist for a reason. And there's a cliche that if you do what you love, you’ll never work a day in your life. And it’s 100% true.

**Max Irzhak** [00:08:11] What are your guiding principles that keep you motivated and mission-focused?

**Jake Wood** [00:08:14] Leave the world a better place than you found it. I think that’s how i’ve tried to live my life in the pursuit of impact, in the pursuit of making someone else’s day or life better at every chance i can.

**Max Irzhak** [00:08:29] With the COVID-19 global pandemic we face the largest threat to our communities in modern history.

This is a 2 part question:

Why is community involvement at the *local level* so important to defeat this virus?

And can you tell us about the new vaccine coalition that your team launched just earlier today.

**Jake Wood** [00:08:46] Yeah well you know, this is the first time in our nation’s history that all 50 states, plus our U.S. territories have been under simultaneous emergency declaration. So this is an all-hands-on-deck disaster. Our system for emergency management in the U.S. is designed to be as local as possible, and I think that’s for good reason. The federal government can come in at times to provide assistance, provide money, but really the response you know, whether it’s a hurricane or whether it’s a pandemic, is incumbent upon local governments to be effective in that response. So this is a whole-of-nation effort. We have to ensure that the federal government is providing the funding, and the resources—but execution is going to happen at the state and at the county level. So that’s really really important. Knowing that, and knowing that our healthcare systems are overwhelmed, oru public health departments are overwhelmed with this pandemic. We have to figure out where we can add capacity at a local level so that we can accelerate the speed of delivery for this vaccine.

So we have launched, just here in the beginning of February, a new coalition that we’re calling the Veteran’s Coalition for Vaccination, which is pulling together under a single umbrella 6 veteran service organizations with access to well over a million veterans in this country to get them out to serve and support vaccination sites across the country. So that’s one part.

The other part in the purpose of this coalition is to really leverage the trust that the American population retains in its military and veterans to help convince Americans that this vaccine is worth getting, that it’s a patriotic duty—and I would go so far as to say obligation to get this vaccine. You know at a time when 30-50% of Americans are indicating that they don't trust the vaccine and that they won't get one, we won't reach herd immunity and get back to normal unless we reverse that trend. And so our hope is that as trusted public servants, our collective voices can help convince more Americans that “hey this is worth doing, and that ultimately this isn't about you, this is about your country, and this is about your neighbor.”

**Max Irzhak** [00:11:03] How can people support the mission and Team Rubicon?

**Jake Wood** [00:11:06] Well it’s a great question. As a nonprofit organization we rely on philanthropy to do our work. And so to the extent people have the ability to donate to the organization we’d love to have them. Go to our website teamrubiconusa.org, consider a donation, and listen, if you’re a military veteran or if you have a veteran in your life that you think would benefit from serving alongside Team Rubicon, we’d love to have him or her join our ranks, become a Greyshirt.

And i'll also add that our ranks are not made up exclusively of military veterans. If you have been inspired by what you heard, if you want to join the ranks, please sign up, we’ll give you all the skills you need to do the work. And we’d love to have you alongside us.

**Max Irzhak** [00:11:49] Tell us about your new book ‘Once a Warrior: How One Veteran Found a New Mission Closer to Home.

**Jake Wood** [00:11:56] Yeah so this book came our last Fall, right around the Election. And I'd chosen to write it about 2 years prior, and there were a couple of reasons why I wanted to write it. One, my first daughter was born, and that was obviously a moment of reflection for me and one of the things I realized was that at some point she was going to ask me about the wars. And I felt like i deserved her a better answer than I could muster at the time because I realized that I hadn't really given myself the time and space to process my wartime experience and how I felt about them today. So writing the book in part was an exploration of that question.

And then at the same time, Team Rubicon was approaching its 10-year anniversary, the organization had really grown into something that was truly special and is going to last for the next 100 years, and I felt like the organization, its founding story should be memorialized. And so it was an amazing experience writing this story of going to war, coming home, losing my best friend and in the aftermath of that building this organization that means so much to so many people. And through that, explore these themes of service and sacrifice.

And finally, I would say that it was timely. It came out last year right around the Election, at a period of time when our country is so divided, and at a period of time when i think so many Americans are afraid that our country’s best years are behind it—and that we’re in this slow and steady decline. And i think that if people read this book, they’ll realize that America’s best years are in front of it, if we choose to—if we choose to pursue it and live up to that. And so as an author it was the most amazing moment of my life when Tom Brokaw reviewed the book and said it’s the book America needs right now… that was the most epic author moment ever.

**Max Irzhak** [00:14:02] What is the one lesson you want people to walk away with after reading the book?

**Jake Wood** [00:14:07] Every action you take, every interaction you have, every word you speak has the potential to either make somebody’s life better or make somebody’s life worse. Be really deliberate with how you choose to live your life and interact with people on a daily basis.

**Max Irzhak** [00:14:22] Jake, it's been an honor. Thank you to you and Team Rubicon for your incredible commitment, your service, and for all that you do.

I encourage everyone to buy Jake’s new book “Once A Warrior”, and to visit teamrubiconusa.org to learn more about how you can help. Just follow the links in the description below.

Thank you everyone for joining us today. We’ll see you next week on Motivational Mondays!

**Music intro** [00:14:44-00:14:50]