



Shipkey: It's about those who didn't come home

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“If there’s anything I can say it’s that most people should remember that Memorial Day is not about the start of summer or the opening of pools, and it’s not about me because I came home,” Shipkey said. “Memorial Day is strictly about our brothers and sisters who never came home, remembering them and never forgetting it. And making sure that we never do again what we did in the Vietnam era and not welcome them home.”

Shipkey, director of Medical Center Hospital's emergency department and medical director for Odessa Fire Department, served six years active duty in the Army. He said the experience still influences how he approaches medicine.

"I think the greatest thing that the military teaches you is selfless service," he said. "You do the job and don't expect any accolades for it. You don't get any accolades for it. You do the job you've been trained to do and that's reward enough.

"The military does a fantastic job training you. Fortunately, I received some heightened training in trauma, being deployed in combat in Iraq. That certainly helps with civilian applications."

Shipkey grew up in Buffalo, New York, and earned his undergraduate degree at Canisius before studying medicine at SUNY-Buffalo on an Army program. Shipkey spent his residency at Fort Hood, where he first connected with another physician who has made Odessa home, Dr. Sudip Bose.

"Dr. Shipkey is a great friend of mine," Bose said. "We were both chief residents in our military emergency medicine residency program. After medical school, he came from Buffalo, New York, I came from Chicago and we bonded during our time at Fort Hood, where we went through our emergency medicine training. That was the busiest military emergency department in the world and I was thankful that we were trained especially well."

Shipkey said it was easy to draw parallels between military service and civilian medical practice.

"I think that the way that I equate that with medicine is that this really is a social compact between America and the military," he said. "America, the idea of the great nation we are, we count on our soldiers to do exactly what they're told and keep us safe. In return, the soldiers expect to be well trained, well equipped, well supported, to leave when the job is done and then to be supported when they come home." The situation is even more apparent in light of the coronavirus pandemic, Shipkey said.

"I want all the citizens of Odessa to know that, no matter what, whether we've got this incredibly contagious pandemic, we're going to show up for work and we're going to do the job," he said. "Whether that puts us at risk or not is irrelevant. We're going to do the job.

"In return, the outpouring of support we saw from the community was just amazing, people making 3D-printed face shields and homemade masks. I can't tell you how many meals at the hospital that continue to show up. It's a two-way street that really equates the military with what we're seeing right now."

Complicating matters is the fact that the pandemic puts many people in the situation of facing what is possibly a life-threatening event just by going to work.

“It’s a little bit easier for me because I’ve been there and that’s part of the job, but this is not what a lot of people signed up for,” Shipkey said. “The way they’ve rose to the occasion, I couldn’t be prouder. Especially those folks who are workers not in health care.

“Think about the hospital, the engineers, custodial services, food services who just came to do their jobs no questions asked and we’re instantly as much at risk as the rest of us. That just makes me really proud for America, really.”

With many restrictions on public gatherings still in place, the absence of parades and cookouts should make for a more reflective, contemplative Memorial Day, Shipkey said.

“I think it probably does make you think a little bit more about what it’s really all about,” he said. “Hopefully, some people will take the opportunity to hit up Google and see what Memorial Day is all about and say, ‘Wow, thank you’ to all the men and women who kept this great nation safe since our inception.

“That’s my hope. You’re always trying to make lemonade out of lemons, so let’s make something positive out of this.”

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