

# FROM HATS TO HEALING

Operation Hat Trick provides support to wounded veterans through an innovative licensing program

By DONNA BOYLE SCHWARTZ



**THEY PROMISED TO DEFEND.  
WE PROMISE TO SUPPORT.**



Operation Hat Trick has donated \$1 million to various veterans' service organizations.

A unique nonprofit organization, Operation Hat Trick, will have donated a total of \$1 million to various veterans' service organizations by December of this year. And it all started with an ordinary baseball cap.

"We have more than 1.5 million hats on heads today, and we're increasing that number every day," explains Dot Sheehan, founder and CEO of Operation Hat Trick. The idea for the organization was born in 2007 when Sheehan was listening to a Boston radio station airing a trivia contest: one question was "What's the one thing most wanted by head-wounded soldiers returning from Iraq

and Afghanistan?" The answer? "Baseball caps to cover wounds, burns, swelling, and bandages."

Operation Hat Trick became a reality in 2008 when tragedy struck the University of New Hampshire community where Sheehan was senior associate athletic director, external relations. Nate Hardy and Mike Koch, two Navy SEAL friends who trained and fought together, had died in a nighttime raid in Iraq against an Al-Qaeda suicide bomb cell; the two are buried side by side at Arlington National Cemetery. Hardy was the son of UNH professor Steve Hardy and his wife Donna; word of the tragedy quickly spread. Sheehan decided to memorialize their passing by starting Operation Hat Trick, giving away OHT-branded hats to service members with head and brain injuries at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center and other Veterans Administration facilities.

"I'll never forget the first day I visited Walter Reed and the first man I gave a hat to—he was a triple amputee, and when I handed him a hat, we both got very emotional, because the hat covered his burns and he said it made him feel 'almost normal,'" Sheehan recalls. "That was such a powerful moment for me, and I knew we were on the right track."

Operation Hat Trick operates differently from most veterans' service organizations. The organization generates awareness and support for the recovery of wounded service members and veterans through the sale of branded merchandise and products, proceeds of which are donated to selected organizations that support the OHT mission. "We got our start by giving hats to service members with head and brain injuries, but soon realized that we could do even more by selling our merchandise and products and using the proceeds to support the recovery of service members and veterans," Sheehan explains.

"Licensing is a huge source of our funding," she adds. "We are taking a proven business model and applying the proceeds to a social need—87 percent of our royalties are donated out, and we want to get that as close to 100 percent as possible. We also raise money through our own direct sales of merchandise, and those proceeds

are donated to our partner organizations as well." Operation Hat Trick also accepts private and corporate donations.

The organization has a unique donation model, serving as a "pass-through" organization and providing funding to some 40 agencies working with veterans. "We don't give to individuals—we give financial support to organizations at a grassroots level that fit our mission of helping wounded and recovering veterans," Sheehan notes. "Sometimes it can be as simple as arranging for four new tires for a veteran who would have lost his job without a vehicle, or providing fuel to help a family get through the winter in a cold area. Sometimes it is more involved, such as providing service dogs for wounded veterans or funding a housing transition program for homeless veterans."

Organizations that provide direct services and support to wounded service members and veterans are typically the recipients of OHT funding and have included Adaptive Training Foundation, Canine Companions for Independence, the Exalted Warrior Foundation, Brazos Valley Cares, the AL Marines Foundation, Combat Wounded Coalition, Idaho Veterans Garden, Warriors for Freedom Foundation, Project Sanctuary, The Yellow Ribbon Fund, Veterans Count, the Navy SEAL Foundation, Semper Fi Fund, the Warrior Bonfire Project, Liberty House, Ironstone Farm, Homes For Our Troops, and Walter Reed.

"It's our duty to serve our service members and veterans by helping them address the visible and invisible wounds of war," Sheehan points out. "Our wounded veterans deserve to be treated with respect and care."



**Licensing is a big source of funding for the Operation Hat Trick organization.**