



Matt and Mandy
Lewandowski

A TALE OF TWO CIVILIANS

Mandy and Matt Lewandowski's charity paves the way to lifesaving services for members of the United States special operations community

BY LISA STAMOS | PHOTOGRAPHY BY LINDA M. BARRETT



CHICAGO CHARITY CLAYS

FOR NEARLY HALF of their 22-year marriage, North Barrington residents Mandy and Matt Lewandowski have provided a platform, Chicago Charity Clays (CCC), to raise funds for veterans of the most elite military operations. These are the men and women who do the most dangerous combat operations and training across the globe. United States special operations personnel go through intense training, dangerous missions, and they live in a hyper-alert state for years.

Many of these elite soldiers develop “operator syndrome,” which is a unique constellation of interrelated medical and behavioral health care issues. Those issues follow them home, affecting their lives and those of their families. We spoke with Mark Owen whose TV show “SEAL Team” explores these issues, especially from a military family’s perspective (see sidebar).

Operator syndrome includes traumatic brain injury, endocrine dysfunction, sleep disturbance, chronic joint and back pain, and orthopedic problems. Often, these illnesses go untreated and exacerbate into substance abuse, anger, worry, hypervigilance, and depression. Left untreated, operator syndrome and other untreated mental health issues lead to an estimated 22 suicides by military veterans per day. “Many special operations members who return home are having trouble assimilating,” Mandy said. “They are given anti-depressants but are not getting the healthcare and treatments they need.”

Matt explains that special operations veterans in need of help today served between 2001 to 2021 in the Global War on Terrorism. These elite warriors would have been deployed overseas or training 300 days per year, for years at a time. While there is less activity at this time, special operations forces might be in numerous countries around the world today on constant high alert.

Mandy is a strong advocate for the wives who join their husbands at the Chicago Charity Clays event. The couple invites as many veteran couples as possible to stay at their home for their fundraiser. There, information is shared, and stories told. Many of the wives do not know about SOC-F’s services on marriage and couples counseling, and other services that help with healing. “It’s really interesting to hear what the women go through both while their husbands are deployed and away training, and when they return home,” Mandy said.

A VISION FOR CHICAGO CHARITY CLAYS

It was a chance outing with friends who went bird hunting in Georgia, when Matt stayed behind at the lodge to shoot clay targets. He’d become so good at this 2010-12 recession-era sport he picked up, that he competed as a master clay shooter at a world championship in France. He met the late Spike Wahlen at the shoot, the co-founder of the Atlanta Charity Clays, whose impact on the lives of so many cannot be overstated.

Whalen invited Matt to an Atlanta Charity Clays event whose proceeds benefitted a local children’s hospital in the city. Matt’s interest grew and Wahlen put together a meeting in Chicago for him and Navy SEAL Mark Owen. It lasted three hours. Matt knew he wanted to extend the Charity Clays concept to Chicago, and with Mandy’s blessing, they made the decision to go forward with it. What remained was the question of how to disperse the proceeds from their event.

THE SPECIAL OPERATIONS CARE FUND

The two knew that they didn’t have the time to handle the administrative job of finding people in need, and then managing the entire process. Instead, they wanted to find the right charity partner. They decided to interview David Kramer, of the Special Operations Care Fund (SOC-F) in Atlanta, whose nonprofit does just that. Kramer is the SOC-F founder and the executive president on the board. He volunteers at SOC-F and works full-time at Magpul Industries.

The mission statement explains SOC-F’s purpose. “We created SOC-F in 2013 for one purpose: to make a positive and meaningful difference in the lives of SOF families who have given so much for our country and our freedom. We do this by raising money for one incredibly worthwhile purpose: to provide medical, financial, and other support to SOF members and their families in ways that are often not met through other sources—what we call the “gaps.”

“Our aim is for 85% efficiency or higher,” Kramer said of the budget that goes directly to services. “When there was no executive director (now Army Special Mission Unit veteran, Jeremy Morton) or patient care coordinator (now Michael Hardin) we maintained this high percentage all the time. However, we were small, not having a huge impact. We desired to grow, to make a larger impact on the community we serve.

Kramer says that typically 10-15% of annual revenues come from the annual Chicago Charity Clays fundraiser. “We could easily send 250 people to our Hormone/Peptide Program and Psychedelic Assisted Therapy, have a prudent reserve for Addiction/Alcoholism, and pour significant resources into the programming for spouses and kids,” Kramer says of CCC’s impact.

THEIR PASSION TO HELP VETERANS

Mandy grew up in a “very small town of 200” in Southern Illinois. At 19, she signed with Elite Models and started a modeling career that took her around the world for print work and runway shows. She competed for Miss Illinois USA in 1998, and after winning, she then went on to represent Illinois in Miss USA. She and daughter Vivica, who won Miss Illinois Teen USA in 2022, share the title as the only mother and daughter to win both Miss Illinois USA titles. Mandy later attended college and earned a marketing degree.



Mandy and Matt Lewandowski relax at home.

“My Dad was drafted into the army for the Vietnam War,” Mandy said. “He was away training, and my family faced terrible hardships financially. My grandpa became sick a week before my dad would have been deployed. His entire unit was killed in the war. As a young girl I remember that every Memorial Day my parents would take us to the local cemeteries, and we’d put flags on all of the soldiers’ graves. It made a lasting impression of the sacrifices so many have made.”

Mandy’s perspective fuels her passion for helping veterans through CCCs. “My parents lost their home, but these soldiers lost their lives. Growing up like we did, we were taught to work hard. I was the first person in my family to graduate from college. My parents didn’t have much growing up, but my mom had nine brothers and sisters. I have over 100 cousins. Family made us wealthy. Thank you for helping us spread the word on our charity and for giving us the ability to reach so many people,” she shared with us.

Matt was raised in Palatine, Illinois, and attended Fremd High School, and completed his business studies at DePaul University in Chicago. He played a lot of baseball growing up and says his mom was his biggest cheerleader who never missed any of his games. His dad worked in the warehouse and trucking industry and tragically, Matt lost him during his senior year in high school. Today, Matt’s dad’s business partner, George Cibula, also Matt’s godfather, is his business partner at Darwin Industrial Real Estate, where Mandy also works. Matt noted “A 20-year career of industrial real estate investments has helped me build a rolodex of some incredibly generous and

wonderful people who have been gracious supporters since day one.”

“My dad would buy old war planes, basically in pieces, and with some buddies, restore them and then fly them at air shows,” Matt said. “When I wasn’t playing sports, I would join him at the shows, and I learned a lot about the planes and their history. Dad was always giving to others, and I would meet World War II veterans who told me stories. Dad would often give them rides in his planes. It was then that I fell in love with the military.”

The other time Matt fell in love was at the erstwhile Champs Sports Bar and Grill in Schaumburg. By chance, Mandy and Matt met there through friends. Matt told his friend Peter Parthenis, “That is the girl I am going to marry.” He literally passed Mandy a note on a napkin that read, “I like you. Do you like me? Circle yes or no.” Mandy replied, “Maybe.”

Ways You Can Help

To support the mission of Chicago Charity Clays, consider becoming a corporate sponsor. The best auction items beneficial for this event include experiences, travel packages, airfare, vacation homes, and foundation or corporate donations.

To learn more, visit soc-f.org. For Chicago Charity Clays event information and tickets, visit chicagocharityclays.com. For sponsorships and other questions, contact mlewandowski@darwinpw.com or call 630-993-3870.



A SUCCESSFUL START


“When Matt told me he wanted to do the Charity Clays event here in Chicago, I told him I thought he was crazy,” Mandy said. “How in the world are we going to pull this off and can we really make a difference?” she asked him.

They pulled their first fundraiser together with 60 of their friends. Spike Wahlen helped. He took his private jet to Fort Bragg and picked up a group of special operations guys to attend the CCCs and share their stories while on the clay shooting course. Brett Seibert, general manager of the Northbrook Sports Club, has been a generous and supportive sponsor from their first event.

Each year since, Matt and Mandy and their wonderful army of wives who volunteer, pull together a full day of registration, lunch, sending the guests off to the clay courses, and then it’s a evening of auctions, dinner, cocktails, and amazing stories from those who served in the top tier of the U.S. military. “These guys are national treasures, they are geniuses,” Matt said. They share stories of heroism, the horrors, and life as warriors.

A CALL TO ACTION

“Everyone has a purpose, a reason why we are here,” Mandy said. “We found this purpose, a way we can bring in the world’s greatest warriors to spend a full day with local business leaders and patriots, while having a great time, while helping heroes and their families. This is something we jumped into 10 years ago, and now it’s part of our lives.”

The Lewandowski family and their friends and supporters invite you to join them for what many have called a life-changing event this October 11, 2024, at the Chicago Charity Clays. 

A Conversation with Navy SEAL Mark Owen

Mark Owen is a retired Navy SEAL who served for 13 years since the days of 9/11. He is the author of two books, “No Hero: The Evolution of a Navy Seal,” and “No Easy Day: The Autobiography of a Navy Seal: The Firsthand Account of the Mission That Killed Osama Bin Laden.” “No Easy Day” is the #1 New York Times bestselling first-person account from the SEAL Team 6 team leader on the planning and execution of the Bin Laden raid from a Navy SEAL who confronted the terrorist mastermind and witnessed his final moments.

Owen is also the executive producer of SEAL Team, a long-running CBS TV show about a tight-knit unit of Navy SEALs who train for, plan and execute dangerous, high-stakes missions, and deploy for those missions around the world at a moment’s notice. Owen’s scripting for the show focuses on the impact of what Navy SEALs do, and how it affects them, and their families. We spoke with Owen about the importance of the Special Operations Care Fund (SOC-F) from his perspective.

Why are our soldiers not getting enough help when they return home?

There is only so much help available through the VA [United States Department of Veterans Affairs]. I’m one of those guys who went to the VA for help. I went to the VA multiple times for neck and back injuries, but never got past the X-rays that were taken; I never saw a specialist with the VA. I was connected to a civilian doctor who said I urgently needed immediate surgery on my neck, as it was in very bad shape. I have been to countless doctor appointments and have had five surgeries to correct the damage.

Did SOC-F help you through this?

Yes, SOC-F helped me with some of the mental health therapies I needed. There is a huge gap for soldiers in accessing the mental health services they need—many vets are left to face their issues on their own. There’s only so much the VA can and will do. We go out of our way to talk about the mental health issues and family impact in the SEAL Team show.

How do veterans connect with SOC-F?

People get connected through many ways and through many different people. But the two main people to try and get a hold of are David Kramer or Jeremy Morton at SOC-F. You can visit their website at soc-f.org to learn more. Another avenue is through relationships. Several Barrington people and others who have come to Chicago Charity Clays have reached out to Matt Lewandowski and he has made the connection to SOC-F for friends of friends in need.

What’s the importance of the Chicago Charity Clays fundraiser?

The Chicago Charity Clays is an important source of SOC-F funding for those of us who need help. All of this comes down to great people like Mandy and Matt Lewandowski who are willing to engage and get involved. The world is a better place because of them and their role in SOC-F. We were connected through SOC-F’s Atlanta clays events, and they wanted to make an extension of that in Chicago. They’ve built an amazing community around that effort.

Why doesn’t our government do a better job of helping our veterans after their service?

During recruitment, training, and war time, the health services provided are the best medicine known to man. But when soldiers come home, and are no longer active in the forces, they are no longer the priority. They’re in the rearview mirror.