



Carl Vinson VA Medical Center, 1826 Veterans Blvd., Dublin, GA 31021



Media Release

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Post Traumatic Growth and Bouncing Forward *Marine credits VA for new direction in life*

Dublin, Ga. – Mike "Big Red" Holston always had a big personality to match his big frame. Outgoing and determined, the former U.S. Marine with the booming voice and once 23-inch biceps pursued life with optimism and conviction.

But in recent years, the former powerlifter who could deadlift 800 lbs. and bench 600 at 18 had reached the end of his rope and his hope.

"I had a .380 caliber pistol to my head and was ready to end it," Holston said.

Suffering from chronic health conditions due to exposure to tainted water at Camp Lejeune containing volatile organic compounds (VOCs) in the early 80's, Holston had both legs amputated in 2024. The loss of mobility presented him with challenges that he had never known and wasn't ready for. Certainly not emotionally.

"I don't remember crying as an adult until I was 37. My mama told me it wasn't good to be so closed off, but I was tough, just like I thought men should be. Man, I was so wrong."

Holston said that his mother, who died in April 2024, was his best friend and only emotional support.

"It wasn't that people weren't there for me if I needed them, but the way I came up, men just didn't cry or ask for help," Holston said.

At peace with his decision and his God, Holston pulled the trigger. The gun jammed.

"I should have known then that I wasn't finished yet, but I didn't take the hint."

Holston would plan two more suicide attempts, only to have people who cared convince him to stay around.

"I know God shouldn't have to send anyone so many messages. I guess I just wasn't ready to listen," Holston said.

He admitted that he felt a certain sense of relief when he decided to end his life.

"I had been through anger, sadness, bitterness. Somehow, once I made the decision to end my life, I felt a sense of relief, like a huge burden had been lifted. I just didn't want to be a burden anymore."

Sitting in a Macon, Georgia homeless shelter, he decided that his final suicide attempt would be by hanging.

"I thank God every day that I didn't do it."

Two days before he planned to hang himself, a friend convinced him to try the VA. On July 6, 2025, he made a trip to the Carl Vinson VA Medical Center that he says started a process that saved his life.

"Most of the healthcare facilities I went to just focused on my health, not how I felt about all the changes. Sometimes I got the impression that they just wanted me to leave. The VA was a totally different experience," Holston recalled.

Holston talked with social worker Carlisle "Carlie" Lund, a conversation that he says redirected his life and his perspective.

"She didn't just check on my biological health, she kept asking about how I felt," Holston emphasized.

"And it wasn't just Carlie. Everybody I met at VA kept asking me how I was doing and could they help me. I mean, not just medical folks but housekeepers, police officers, workers in the cafeteria, right on down the line. Sheila Hatcher, Carol Lanier, Tiffany Buckley, Wanda Ashley, Laura Kirkland, Cena Baker, Teresa Griffin, Michelle Plummer, Leatrice Mitchell, Janet Bonds, Latisha Moore. See what I'm saying? I could go on and on. I even got a visit from Mr. Lenearo Ashford, the medical center director, and he told me to reach out if I needed him. A lot of them weren't even VA folks, just people that work with them there, like Ms. Nicole Clark at the Georgia Department of Veterans Service. I just couldn't believe it."

Another aspect of his recovery involved a re-commitment to his spirituality.

"I've always been a Godly man, but I realized that maybe I wasn't focusing on it enough. Maybe bringing God back into my life more deliberately was part of the answer," Holston said.

So, he started meeting with VA chaplain Angelika Mitchell three times each week for spiritual support.

“I love that lady. Seeing that the VA considers spiritual care as being as important as physical care really made an impression on me. Those VA chaplains can really lay things out for you while still showing you love. I really like that,” Holston said.

With tears in his eyes, Holston said that he hasn’t felt so loved and appreciated since his mom passed away.

“I guess I’m a crybaby now,” Holston laughed.” I never used to cry and now I do it at the drop of a hat. My heart is just full. I had heard so many bad things about VA, but they’ve only been good to me.”

Social worker Greg Senters said that Holston’s experience is not unusual.

“The thing about suicide is that it truly is a permanent solution to manageable challenges. Once we become aware of veterans in crisis and start a discussion with them, they’re often surprised how ready we are to help them redirect their lives,” Senters said.

Senters understands the frustration that veterans sometimes feel with the administrative requirements of the VA system.

“But that’s what we’re here for,” Senters said. “We have to honor the requirements of the law and use the system responsibly, but that’s our job to worry about, not the Veteran’s. We like to think of ourselves as navigators of the system for the veteran, helping them through the process.”

Holston admitted that there have been some minor frustrations along the way.

“Things are slow sometimes, but every time there’s an issue or complication, somebody in the VA is ready to work on it. I got nothing but love for my VA folks.”

Asked to sum up his experience with VA healthcare, Holston looked thoughtful for a moment and said:

“You know what I most appreciate about my experience with the VA? It’s not the medical care. That’s great and I am truly thankful. But what’s most important to me is what I learned about people by being here. I learned that ‘family’ is not biological. Family is in the heart. When people care about you and you care about them, and you make a commitment to each other, that’s family. I got a lot of biological family that I love, and now I got a big wonderful, VA family to go with it. God is good.”

He also had a message for his fellow veterans and others who might be thinking about taking their own lives.

“Don’t do it. Stay with us. Reach out. VA’s working for me and I know it will work for you. Give it a real chance.”

Red Holston is back. Armed with a new perspective and a new life plan, he’s looking toward a future he couldn’t have imagined a few months ago. He wants to use his experience to encourage other veterans in crisis to get help. He’s even thinking about training again.

“I heard about the national Veterans Wheelchair Games they have each summer. I think I’ll hit the gym again and show those folks what’s up!” Holston says, smiling.

If you or someone you know is having thoughts of suicide, contact the Veterans Crisis Line to receive free, confidential support and crisis intervention available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. Dial 988 then Press 1, text 838255 or chat online at VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat.

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Reporters covering this issue can download [VA’s Safe Messaging Best Practices](#) fact sheet or visit www.ReportingOnSuicide.org for important guidance on how to communicate about suicide.

Photo:

- 1) Mike “Big Red” Holston and Dublin VA social worker Greg Senters team up to coordinate Holston’s healthcare
- 2) Guns and graciousness—Red Holston now uses the mental attitude that helped him succeed in bodybuilding to succeed in recovery

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