Banishing Night Terrors

BY **JAN SHAW-FLAMM '76**
PHOTO **RENEE JONES SCHNEIDER/*STAR TRIBUNE***

When a project on Kickstarter rapidly brings in pledges of 22 times the hoped-for goal, it says a couple of things. 1) The project addresses a critical need and 2) People you have never even met believe in you.

The wildly successful project in question is an app called myBivy, which refers to a soldier's temporary shelter, called a bivouac. It is dedicated to addressing night terrors, a common symptom of PTSD. The app—developed by **Tyler Skluzacek '16** and his team, "The Cure," at the grueling 36-hour coding competition Hack DC—won first place as Best PTSD Mobile App for Clinicians. Skluzacek was powerfully motivated to help veterans and others suffering from night terrors after seeing his father battle PTSD following a tour of duty in Iraq. The app runs on a smart watch and tracks physiological changes that presage night terrors, so that those changes may be interrupted before the veteran experiences terrors.

"The app exploits the science of sleep cycles," says Skluzacek, explaining that it's data-driven and recorded for the veteran, who can also choose to have it delivered to the VA database. For the 3.6 million veterans diagnosed with PTSD, myBivy has the potential to dramatically improve their quality of life.

Maybe that's why 694 backers on three continents have pledged more than $26,000 to the project, which originally sought far less than that. This will enable Skluzacek and friends to move more quickly than anticipated to get the app onto veterans' wrists. Originally made for the Pebble, the extra financial support will allow them to develop the app for Apple and Android smart watches as well. The other major step is testing the app on a large sample of people, which the Department of Veterans Affairs and Duke University will direct on the team's behalf. Within a few weeks of winning the competition, Skluzacek had appeared in BBC Radio, *USA Today*, *People*, *NBC News*, *The Huffington Post*, Gizmodo, the *Star Tribune* and the U.S. Department of Defense blog.

In November came another endorsement: After a five-minute pitch at the MobCon conference, Skluzacek and myBivy won the grand prize of $5,000 plus $23,000 worth of mobile development and legal advice.

Some well-meaning people have encouraged Skluzacek to leave school to focus full time on myBivy, but that's not going to happen. For one thing, he cites the great support he's received at Macalester, both from his professors and from people like Entrepreneur in Residence **Kate Ryan Reiling '00** and alum entrepreneur extraordinaire **Seth Levine '94**. And then there's this: "My mother wouldn't stand for it."

A first-generation college student (see *Macalester Today*, Summer 2014), Skluzacek worked too hard for this opportunity to squander it. "In my high school, we had no AP classes," he says. "I was a good student, but when I got here, there was quite a gap between my high school experience and the demands of my classes at Mac, so my early GPA wasn't the best."

With perseverance, he has more than bridged that gap; Skluzacek will graduate this spring with three majors —computer science, applied math and statistics, and economics.

Despite staying in school and even planning to go on to pursue a PhD in computer science, Skluzacek isn't abandoning myBivy: He hopes to further develop it this winter and possibly continue his work on it during graduate school.

After all, there are people depending on him and the rest of The Cure—veterans who can't sleep and abuse survivors who wake in terror. Note some of the comments from myBivy's Kickstarter page:

"I'm a retired MSG [Master Sergeant], U.S. Army, and am very excited about what you're doing."

"I believe this will have a great impact on the veteran community. I also believe that this will help [reduce] the 22 vet suicides a day."

"Good luck. Thank you for hope."

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