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# Niskayuna NEIGHBORS



*Jeff Bryan*

—Building Relationships with The Positivity Project



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# Jeff Bryan

## —Building Relationships with The Positivity Project

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PHOTOS BY MIA ERTAS PHOTOGRAPHY &  
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Jeff Bryan has traveled the world serving our country and researching ways to give all of us the opportunity of living our best lives.

He grew up right here in Niskayuna, graduating in the class of 2000. Back then, sports were his thing—baseball and soccer his original favorites. But in eighth grade, he played lacrosse and became hooked. He enjoyed the teamwork, camaraderie, hard work, and perseverance that came with the sport, and excelled. Captain of both the soccer and lacrosse teams, Jeff became a high school lacrosse All-American in 2000 before West Point's coach, Jack Emmer, recruited him for their team, where Jeff became team captain and a two-time All-American at Army. The love for the sport apparently ran in the family since his younger brother Mark also became a two-time All-American for Niskayuna lacrosse in 2004 and 2005 and then a member of the 2007 National Championship lacrosse team at Johns Hopkins University.

Jeff's time at West Point provided a foundation for his life. "West Point was a great opportunity to test myself as a student, an athlete, and a person," says Jeff. He enjoyed his time there, but 9/11 hit during his sophomore year and he knew he'd be going to war. His first deployment to Iraq happened in 2006. Serving as a platoon leader, Jeff was stationed in the city of Saba al Bour where they focused on building relationships, gathering intelligence, and conducting daily patrols. He was there for 12 months, earning the Bronze Star Medal before coming back home—but his stay in America didn't last long. Deployed again in 2008, Jeff became an engagements officer in southern Baghdad, this time working with Iraqi businessmen, police, military, and local politicians to drive reconciliation and reconstruction efforts. "I enjoyed the camaraderie and relationships that the military helps people build," says Jeff. "Having a common goal that's difficult to accomplish teaches you a lot about teamwork—and about the character of yourself and other people."

In fact, his time in Iraq inspired the idea for his new mission once he came back to the US—The Positivity Project (P2). Often, veterans have a hard time returning to civilian life for many reasons, but one reason is because the relationships with the people around them are so different. Authentic relationships aren't a luxury in



the military—they are essential for survival. His ability to connect with others is a big part of Jeff's success during those years and was exemplified in many situations: his soldiers trusted him so much they specifically asked for him to be their platoon leader; Jeff and his interpreter, Yasir, became so close they could read and anticipate each other's moves; their platoon's informant network constantly yielded measurable results; an Iraqi citizen that Jeff had established trust with calmed a mob to help his platoon; Jeff even removed his





Jeff & Yasir



Jeff & Mike Erwin

helmet and vest to drink tea during his meetings with the sheiks, politicians, and business leaders as a way to prove his trust in their relationships. These actions all made a difference.

However, when he came home and took a job in the private sector and then the US Department of State, he noticed a shift in his work environment. It felt like more of a “looking out for #1” mentality among co-workers—a more self-absorbed community with a disconnect in words and actions. Jeff witnessed this even more so by many people in leadership positions. This challenged his desire to live a life of impact and service like he had hoped.

Mike Erwin, a friend of Jeff’s since they were at West Point and stationed at Ft. Hood, TX together, was experiencing a similar situation. After Mike came home from Afghanistan, he attended a graduate psychology program and met Dr. Chris Peterson, the co-founder of the field of Positive Psychology—the scientific study of what makes life worth living. As Dr. Peterson often

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## RESIDENT FEATURE

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said, “Anything that builds relationships between and among people is going to make you happy.” Dr. Peterson also co-authored the 800-page book *Character Strengths and Virtues*, which defined and classified 24 character strengths that exist in all individuals. The philosophy resonated with Mike, and he shared it with Jeff, who was fascinated with the character strength research. This research was grounded in ideas that had been around for thousands of years in multiple cultures. It gave Jeff an empowering lens to view others around him as well as himself.

The two friends knew they would use the information to help others and to carry on the legacy of Dr. Peterson, who passed away in 2012. They wanted to find a way to create the world they desired their kids to grow up in—one where people have meaning in their lives, where people value relationships and character over status, and where people can disagree without hate. A climate where democracy can flourish. But they knew from experience that true democracy takes hard work and requires respect and authentic relationships that pay attention to how we treat each other in order to be strong and resilient enough to meet whatever challenges may come. They wanted their country that they had served to be strong, unified, and a place that they would be proud to hand over to their children.

They started with a Facebook page, uploading Positive Psychology information



and the 24 character strengths. A couple of Mike’s childhood friends who were now working in the school district saw it and wanted to use the content to teach their kids at school about character. The response was hugely popular, and Jeff and Mike knew they found their focus. They incorporated The Positivity Project as a non-profit on December 7, 2015 and launched in 33 schools during the 2016-2017 academic year. The timing was fortuitous as it fell during one of the most heated political seasons our country had ever seen along with a string of school violence instances. Academic studies at the time showed that since the early 1980s, narcissism increased 30 percent and empathy had decreased by 40 percent. Rates of youth depression, anxiety, loneliness, and addiction were growing at alarming rates. There was no better time to try to make a difference.

Former Schenectady High School basketball coach and Teacher of the Year, Gary DiNola, and Niskayuna English

teacher Frank Adamo, jumped on board with the program and served on the education advisory board. DiNola pointed out that “ethics education has been pushed aside in public and private schools alike. Teachers’ focus is now grinding it out—math, science, STEM research, etc. Ethics education, growing leaders within, and setting examples and caring about others has gone to the wayside.”

Jeff and Mike are once again pushing it front and center. Grounded in Dr. Peterson’s and his team’s work, P2 is on a mission to empower America’s youth to build positive relationships and become their best selves. Teaching the 24 character strengths, the program does not ignore the negative situations in the students’ lives—it helps them overcome life’s inevitable adversities by focusing on character and relationships. Dr. Peterson himself often said, “I can sum up positive psychology in just three words: Other people matter. Period.” What started with one school in 2015, has now grown to over 800 schools across the country serving more than 440,000 students, and they continue to grow. P2’s goal is to hit at least 10,000 schools by 2030.

Besides providing their partner schools with the resources, training, and strategy they need for the program, P2 has also extended into the community. “For example, local businesses will place a Positivity Project sticker or a poster up in their store to show they support their local school’s focus on character strengths and positive relationships,” says Jeff. “Also, we have seen districts push into the local community during staff days ahead of the beginning of the school year. Staff will conduct a ‘scavenger hunt’ in which they wear P2 shirts and meet with local businesses and community organizations





(such as police and fire departments) to learn how people in those pillars of the community tap into character in their jobs.” Currently, 17 Capital District schools are using the program, including three in Niskayuna.

After his second deployment, Jeff sponsored his interpreter, Yasir, for a Special Immigrant Visa so Yasir, his wife, and two daughters could move to safety in Nashville in 2009. Yasir went on to graduate from Tufts University and Jeff graduated from the Tufts’ Fletcher School, then served as a Presidential Management Fellow (PMF) with the US Department of State, working in the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations and at the Consulate General Jerusalem as a political military officer reporting on West Bank security. He met his wife, Patti, while visiting friends in Raleigh, NC. She was working as a teacher there, and they dated long distance for a while since Jeff was living in Boston at the time. They then moved to Washington, DC before returning to Niskayuna in 2017. They now have two daughters—Maisie (5) and Josie (3). Jeff tries to instill his mantra of “work hard and be kind” in his daughters and hope they will go on to have wonderful lives in a country where residents are healthy, happy, and resilient.

Jeff loves to spend time with his family and friends, reading, learning new things, growing P2, and studying exceptional people and athletes to see how they approach life. He



has also volunteered his time as an assistant coach for the Niskayuna Boys’ Modified Lacrosse team and as a coach for the five-year-old Niskayuna Club Lacrosse program. He left his job as a Chief Operating Officer at the Quiet Leadership Institute in NYC to focus on P2 full time and now spends a lot of time traveling to their partner schools across the country to check in and see how the team can better support their needs. He hasn’t traveled internationally since leaving the State Department but is looking forward to one day taking his family to explore overseas and visit friends. When home in Niskayuna, Jeff’s favorite places to visit are Newest Lunch for breakfast and working out at Contemporary Athlete in Clifton Park.

Jeff’s passion for creating a better world for his daughters continues to drive him as he focuses on growing P2’s reach, but he always takes a moment to remember that relationships with other people are the foundation of living a happier life. “In a world with tons of distractions, it’s becoming increasingly difficult to build meaningful and lasting relationships,” he says. “That’s why intentionally focusing on building and maintaining relationships is so important. Relationships are messy and complex because people are messy and complex. But positive relationships (with family, friends, and others) are the key driver to life satisfaction. So, I would encourage everyone to lean into their relationships and be present when you’re with other people.”

For more information on The Positivity Project, please visit [posproject.org](https://posproject.org)

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