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Kelli (VanVleet) Roberts and her husband, Scott Roberts, met at Operation Comfort and formed a bond that eventually led to marriage. Courtesy photo

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Liberal native bikes the world with Operation Comfort

By RACHEL COLEMAN • Leader & Times As a little girl growing up in Liberal, Kelli (VanVleet) Roberts liked nothing better than to walk across the street to visit her grandpa Gene Eagen. The front porch provided the perfect setting for stories about his days on the farm and in the U.S. Air Force. “I’d sit there for hours,” she said. “One of his friends who came over sometimes was missing an arm, which scared me until I got used to it. Once I went and grabbed it. I was so intrigued.”

Those childhood experiences became an integral part of Roberts' adult life, which took her from Liberal to Barton County Community College, then on to Texas State University in San Marcos. Today, Roberts routinely travels the world as a recreational therapist for Operation Comfort. The nonprofit agency focuses on helping servicemen and women who've returned from deployment. Their wounds often go deeper than the scars or missing limbs that are easy to see, Roberts said, and recreational activities often provide the key that unlocks a sense of hope and confidence for the future.

"Once a person has been injured, you know, they often think that's it. Our goal is to work with the medical treatment team to prove them wrong — to figure out how he can do it," Roberts said. "We have guys with one arm who can do rock climbing. People who've lost a leg that can swim, ski, ride a bike, even surf." In the process, Roberts said, "they regain their self-respect and sense of personal responsibility. You see the light in their eyes come back. It goes from a place of thinking you'll never be able to do something, to finding out you can."

Roberts' perspective has a personal level since she met and married her husband, Scott, at Operation Comfort. A double amputee, Scott did not win Kelli's heart easily.

"We did not like each other at first," she said. "It's pretty funny now because we became good friends and just kind of fell in love. I wasn't expecting it, but here we are." The couple celebrated their first anniversary in February.

This unexpected turn of events was just one in a series that began as the former LHS track star found her way in the world. A heavily recruited athlete, Roberts (then VanVleet) attended Barton County on scholarship and earned an associate's degree in science. She was poised to continue toward a degree in chemical engineering while competing in track at Texas State. Something changed when she encountered a field of study and work she'd never heard about before.

"I found out about sports and recreational therapy, and knew right away that was what I wanted to do," she said. "I changed my major immediately, even though it meant I lost some credit hours." Roberts knew she wanted to do something that was sports-related — "not in a cubicle," she said. Her instincts were correct.

She earned an internship which eventually led her to Operation Comfort and destinations around the world.

Operation Comfort grew out of a 2004 remodeling project at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, where family members of wounded service members spend months and even years at the hospital due to burns, amputations, traumatic brain injuries and post traumatic

stress disorder. The troops said they wanted to participate in sports and work on cars, so the group responded by setting up programs to give them access to those activities. Today, Operation Comfort provides support to service members who have been wounded in Afghanistan or Iraq. More than fundraising or publicity, Operation Comfort's primary goal is to honor and support wounded military members.

To do so, the group often sponsors bicycle trips in the U.S. and other countries. This week, Roberts and her teammates have embarked on the "Big Battlefield Bike Ride" across Europe, stopping at sites in England and France. Cyclists from Walter Reed Hospital and a few national Canadian service members joined the Texas group for the trip. With the British organization "Help for Heroes," the bicyclists toured several attractions in England before embarking on their journey of more than 300 miles. Along the way, the group will stop at historic sites that commemorate the lives of other servicemen.

"The trips build camaraderie, and help people who are in recovery accomplish something really major," said Roberts. "It really opens new doors for them."

Though this week's activities included a meet-and-greet with Prince William and Prince Harry, a stop at Stonehenge and a visit to Salisbury Cathedral, Roberts said her life and work feels closely connected to her roots in Liberal.

"Growing up in a small town where there's not much to do gives a person so many opportunities," she said. "You fill your time volunteering and doing things that matter. At least, that's what I did. Liberal is a very patriotic town, and sometimes it seemed like I'd been a member of the American Legion from the day I was born. I was raised to respect and acknowledge the sacrifice of servicemen and women, and I love it that I can do that every day."

For everyone, Roberts pointed out, "helping people in the end is always better than doing nothing at all."



ABOVE: With Operation Comfort and the British organization Help for Heroes, Kelli is currently traveling throughout England and France, on a tour of great battlefields from history. Stop one for the group was a meet-and-greet with Prince Harry in London. LEFT: Kelli and Scott meet with former President George H.W. Bush. Courtesy photos

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