



Support the Men and Women Who Secure Our Freedom

A NEWSLETTER ADVOCATING FOR OUR AMERICAN TROOPS

“WE ARE DEDICATED TO PROVIDING SUPPORT AND NEW BEGINNINGS FOR INJURED VETERANS, ACTIVE DUTY PERSONNEL, SPOUSES, CAREGIVERS AND CHILDREN.”

WHAT WE DO MATTERS...

WVST volunteers have just executed another successful winter retreat with 5 couples from US Army Special Operations Command. Our winter program focused on the transition from active duty military to civilian life by providing an opportunity for the participants to engage in conversations as couples and as a group to identify challenges and begin to identify transition plans.

THESE WARRIOR COUPLES TYPICALLY FEEL ANXIOUS ABOUT THE UPCOMING LIFE CHANGES DEPARTURE FROM THE MILITARY WILL BRING.

After 20 plus years of military service, including 3-6 years in combat and more years of separation for training and non-combat deployments, with both visible and non-visible wounds (traumatic brain injuries (TBI) and post-traumatic stress (PTS)), these warrior couples typically feel anxious about the upcoming life changes departure from the military will bring. Some might think it odd that these confident warriors and spouses feel anxiety about the transition period. Stressors include finding jobs that fit their qualifications, where they will live and how will they cope with the upcoming changes in a society that doesn't understand their former lives and the personal and family challenges.

In our program with 4 interactive sessions in a psychologically safe environment, led by Sandi Solem, the couples begin to work through these issues. The sessions focus on transition challenges: where they are currently in their plans and how the uncertainties will affect their families. Our alumni couple, Rob and Kristin, shared how their attendance at last year's retreat provided them the platform and opportunity to make a transition plan amidst the busy day-to-day activities that interfere with couples sitting down to discuss goals, fears and how to build the path ahead. For the soldiers, finding a new identity and purpose after 20-25 years of serving is a major concern. For the spouses, giving up jobs, friends, kid's friends and schools and contemplating potential financial impacts are all stressful considerations.

IN FACT, THE EXPERIENCE IS SO POWERFUL THAT AT LEAST FIVE COUPLES OVER THE PAST 5-7 YEARS HAVE COME TO MONTANA TO RETIRE.

WVST members who have successfully transitioned after full military careers share their stories and shares and talks with his/her couple about the experiences. The participants value the engagement and choose what they need to work on with each other and what goals they will

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NEW GOLD STAR ADULT RETREAT BEGINS THIS SUMMER

In August 2020, we will be expanding our grief and identity focused programs to include a new population: women aged 21 years and older. With the success experienced with our Gold Star Young Adult program, we have the opportunity to grow the services we offer to embrace spouses who have lost a partner in our armed forces.

Support that we can provide to parents goes far beyond that parent. Many of the women that we will be supporting have children. The greatest way to help family units heal together is to support the parents and help them find the navigating skills for themselves and their children due to the devastation of losing a spouse and parent.

Spending time in nature is inherently healing and provides a foundation for growth. In Montana, we have the opportunity to participate in all of the adventures this unique piece of the country has to offer. WVST programs provide a supportive environment for participants to increase self-identity, empowerment, and resiliency. Daily guided group sessions are tailored to increase awareness of 1) how the loss affects identity, 2) coping strategies for daily life interactions and 3) best practices for navigating a path of long-term healing. ■

WHITEFISH VETERANS SUPPORT TEAM HOSTS SUMMER RETREAT FOR INJURED VETERANS

The Whitefish Veterans Support Team (WVST) is pleased to have hosted six injured veterans and their spouses at the annual Summer Retreat September 3-8, 2019. The veterans and spouses spent five days participating in summer adventures including hiking to the Hidden Lake Overlook in Glacier National Park, rafting and fishing on the scenic Middle Fork of the Flathead River and enjoying a pontoon boat ride on Whitefish Lake. Additionally, many of them signed up for the Fun Run at the GreatFish Celebration at Depot Park. One participant came in 2nd place and another took 3rd place.

“LISTENING TO OTHER VETERANS HELPS YOU FEEL NORMAL AND IT HELPS YOU TAKE A MORE POSITIVE AND FOCUSED LOOK AT YOUR FUTURE.”

The WVST partnered with Sandi Solem (PhD, RN), a professional nurse who has spent most of her career working with veterans and their families in a multitude of settings. As a military spouse of 29 years herself, she witnessed the needs of active duty men and women, veterans and their families. She facilitated focus groups

and individual counseling sessions addressing issues relating to injuries, separation during deployments, transition to civilian life, community education and outreach. Several of the veterans expressed finding real value in listening and sharing common concerns and issues. One participant said, “Listening to other veterans helps you feel normal and it helps you take a more positive and focused look at your future.” ■



Several retreat participants enjoyed a sun-filled and relaxing day floating and fly fishing on the Middle Fork of the Flathead River.

VETERANS DISCUSS MEANINGFUL CHANGE AT THE WINTER RETREAT

The Whitefish Veterans Support Team (WVST) hosted its Winter Retreat on January 12-17, 2020. Although the veterans spent five days participating in vigorous, fun-filled outdoor activities, including skiing, snowboarding and cross-country skiing, many of them expressed their appreciation for daily counseling sessions that addressed issues unique to military life. The goal of the event was to bring relevant people, perspective and opportunity into their lives. The sessions focused on helping veterans identify their strengths and skills and apply them to their personal, family and professional lives.

Participants and their spouses felt like they were leaving Whitefish with a renewed sense of confidence and excitement about their future. One veteran said, *“The combination of relevance, camaraderie and support was more than I could have imagined and it has made a meaningful difference.”* WVST continues to provide a comprehensive atmosphere combining counseling and challenging physical activities to facilitate couples’ growth and consider the military to civilian transition. The sessions provide insights into the challenges of the military lifestyle and allow couples to spend time planning and working towards a future beyond the military. ■

SUMMER RETREAT

SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

- DAY 1** Arrival
Meet and Greet Dinner
Introductions/Expectation/Goals
- DAY 2** Group Breakfast
Group Counseling Session 1
Logan Pass/Hidden Lake Hike
Fly Fishing Lessons
BBQ Dinner at Altons
- DAY 3** Group Breakfast
Group Counseling Session 2
Middle Fork Float/Fishing
Dinner at Whitefish Golf Course
- DAY 4** Group Breakfast
Group Counseling Session 3
Lunch at Summit House
Zip Line
Explore Downtown Whitefish
Dinner at Craggy Range
- DAY 5** Group Breakfast
Great Fish Challenge Run
Lunch at Grouse Lodge
Pontoon Cruise on Whitefish Lake
Group Session 4
Dinner at Williams Residence
- DAY 6** Breakfast/Retreat Feedback
Transport to Airport/Lunch

WINTER RETREAT

SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

- DAY 1** Arrival
Meet and Greet Dinner
Introductions/Expectation/Goals
- DAY 2** Group Breakfast
Group Counseling Session 1
Afternoon Ski Lessons
Dinner at Private Residence on Mountain
- DAY 3** Group Breakfast
Group Counseling Session 2
Afternoon Ski Lessons
Groomer Tour
Couples dinner at Hellroaring Saloon
- DAY 4** Group Breakfast
Group Counseling Session 3
Downhill / XC Ski / Downtime
Groomer Tour
Dinner at Bierstube
- DAY 5** Group Breakfast
Morning Ski Lessons
Group Counseling Session 4
Afternoon Ski Lessons
Explore Whitefish/Dinner at Craggy Range
- DAY 6** Breakfast/Retreat Feedback
Transport to airport/lunch

SUMMER RETREAT FOR GOLD STAR KIDS

WVST joined with Folded Flag Foundation to offer a counseling retreat located in a stellar Montana rural environment for eight Gold Star kids, ages 18-20 years old. Gold Star kids are children who have lost a parent serving in the US military.



A perfect day at Bowman Lake

In late July, 2019, eight Gold Star young adults arrived at Glacier International Airport and were whisked by volunteer WVST members to Polebridge Montana for a five-day retreat. These young adults came from North Carolina, Texas, Georgia, California, Missouri. All were strangers to each other, the WVST volunteers, the two on-site counselors from Vertikal Counseling Service (Whitefish, MT) and the two volunteer peer counselors from West Point and the Air Force Academy. Five days later solid friendship bonds united all the members of this diverse group of individuals.

Tent camping, outdoor food preparation, communing with nature, sleeping outside in the woods, plus hiking, rafting, swimming, paddle boarding—all the events that accompany a Montana forest camping adventure—filled each day with new, exciting experiences while fostering new friendships and encouraging the development of self-confidence within the participants.

Many of the visiting young adults had never been camping, never cooked over an outdoor fire and never slept outside. The camping experiences and subsequent camping skills the participants acquired are positive ancillary benefits that accompany WVST's goals of helping these children transition into stable, healthy adults as they cope with the loss of a family member.

Counseling sessions and private time with the on-site counselors offered much time for thoughtful meditation and lifetime goal planning.

“I LOVED THAT THIS RETREAT FOCUSED ON THE PARTICIPANTS’ SELF-IDENTITY AND HOW THEIR PAST EXPERIENCES HAVE SHAPED THEM INTO THE PEOPLE THAT THEY ARE TODAY.”

At the end of five days the participants were asked, “Would you recommend this retreat to a friend?” The answers can be summarized by this one participant’s response:

“YES, IN A HEARTBEAT!” ■



Exploring McDonald Creek

CHILDREN’S GOLD STAR RETREAT

SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

Three meals were provided each day. The kids participated in preparing these meals – assisted by volunteer WVST members.

Counseling provided in the form of group sessions and individual counseling occurred formally and informally during the days’ activities.

DAY 1 Arrive at Glacier International Airport
Drive to Polebridge-Glacier National Park
Set up Camp/Dinner
Group Session 1

DAY 2 Red Bus Ride Over Going to the Sun Highway
Hike to Avalanche Lake
Return to Polebridge/Dinner
Group Session 2

DAY 3 Rafting Trip on North Fork of Flathead River
Free Time
Group Session 3
Dinner

DAY 4 Paddle Boarding, Kayaking, Hiking at Bowman Lake
Dinner at Northern Lights Saloon
Volleyball Games
Group Session 4

DAY 5 Break Camp
Waterskiing / Dinner on Whitefish Lake
Group Session 5
Transport to Grouse Mountain Lodge

DAY 6 Breakfast at Hotel
Transport to the Airport
Fly Home

THE PROGRAM GOALS:

- Engage veterans, spouses, children and caregivers in physically challenging summer and winter retreats in Flathead Valley.
- Provide veterans, spouses, children and caregivers with much needed down time and access to fun and appropriate community events.
- Build meaningful relationships that advance the healing process and encourage veterans to overcome challenges of readjustment to civilian life.
- Raise community support to foster awareness and action to aid veterans in their recovery.

WHAT WE DO MATTERS... CONTINUED FROM FRONT PAGE

work on after the retreat. They write them down, share with the group and put them into a schedule on their calendars. These are simple actions but powerful. The couples appreciate and use the experience based

on feedback received from our follow-ups. In fact, the experience is so powerful that at least five couples over the past 5-7 years have come to Montana to retire. ■



WVST raised \$36,730 from donors and the Whitefish Community Foundation did a matching grant of \$9,800 and a \$50 Fun Run grant.

TOTAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF \$45,580 WILL SUPPORT WVST PROGRAMMING.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE

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The veterans couples, who benefited greatly from this program, wish to extend their thanks to all the donors, listed or not, for the generosity extended to them during the retreat.



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transitioningveteransbook.com
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MISSION STATEMENT:

Empower injured veterans, active duty personnel, caregivers and their families by providing opportunities to build meaningful relationships and engage them in physically and emotionally challenging activities to advance their healing, growth and resiliency.

The Whitefish Veterans Support Team is a charitable 501(c)(3) organization that is solely funded by private donations. We are a small group of Whitefish residents that are dedicated to empowering the lives of injured veterans and creating community awareness to assist in this meaningful effort.

TO LEARN MORE GO TO:
WVSTMT.ORG

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