

Helping to heal wounds

Weekend

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COVER STORY

Warrior Weekend gets military personnel out of the hospital for several days of pampered hospitality

By Glenn Rolfe

Sussex Post Time can heal wounds.

For America's wounded military personnel on the road to recovery, a few days of "R & R" away from the hospital can enhance the healing process.

Here on Delmarva, there's the Warrior Weekend Program. Its mission is to provide a weekend of rest, relaxation and fun for wounded heroes, their spouses and families who are stationed at military medical centers recovering from wounds sustained while serving from the beginning of the Iraq war to present time.

Wounded, still active duty personnel recovering at Fort Belvoir in Fairfax County, Virginia are chosen for the program.

"I love getting these troops off that base and what it means to these guys," said Jim Lafferty, president of the Warrior Weekend Program. "We've got letters from Fort Belvoir and the commanding general from the base ... thanking us for the program and what it means to the troops. They definitely agree that these weekends away help in their recovery process."

"This mini getaway brought my children and I closer together," stated MSGT Brenda Johnson, a Warrior Weekend guest for the May 10-12 trip to Baltimore's Inner Harbor. "This stress free environment allowed me to just relax from my day-to-day stressors with my recovery care. I also loved meeting with other wounded warriors because it's nice to know that we can share our experiences through our recovery to help each other. We are not alone. This weekend made us a priority."

Since its inception in 2007, the Warrior Weekend Program — whose postal address is Harbeson with transportation/ vehicles stationed at American Legion

a little Christmas shopping," said Mr. Lafferty.

Typically, 10 to 12 guests comprise trips, designed to bring a sense of normalcy.

In this case, it's "pampered" normalcy.

Typically, for three-day trips, troops are picked up at Fort Belvoir on Friday at noon. Due to distance and travel, pick-up day is Thursday for the two four-day trips — Hersheypark and Chincoteague.

Troops are taken back to Fort Belvoir Sunday evening.

In between, troops and family members are put up in major hotels or motels with their own rooms. They dine at top quality restaurants and are shown a good time with different events scheduled for their entertainment, if they are interested. If some of the troops would rather just spend time relaxing and being together, that is their choice.

"The weekend is theirs to enjoy and at no cost to them," said Mr. Lafferty. "In all these trips, if somebody doesn't want to participate in the events or the schedule, we'll do whatever they want. The weekends are theirs to relax and reconnect with their families. If it's just husband and wife and they want to spend some time together, that's fine. We just ask that they are all together for meals."

In these overnight excursions with families, attempts are made to have a husband/wife volunteer tandem among the usual four "chaperones." "That way, the wife can be a babysitter so the husband and wife can do something together," said Mr. Lafferty.

In Philadelphia, wounded heroes have been special guests at Eagles

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Post 28 — has completed an average of seven weekend trips each year, spanning April through November.

Trips usually are not scheduled the month of August due to volunteer commitments to various American Legion conferences.

Six of the trip destinations are Rehoboth Beach, Baltimore's Inner Harbor, Philadelphia, Hersheypark in Pennsylvania, Chincoteague and Busch Gardens in Williamsburg, Virginia.

The final weekend getaway of the season is based at Legion Post 28 in November. "We want to give them the opportunity to do



Jim Lafferty, president of the Sussex County-based Warrior Weekend Program, helps military personnel on their road to recovery. He uses this van to transport wounded, active duty military personnel on selected weekend trips with their families.

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and Phillies games. They've been VIP guests for lunch and private tours at NFL Films Studios in Mount Laurel, over the bridge from Philly. Each wounded veteran has received an official helmet of their favorite team.

"You want to see big guys cry," said Mr. Lafferty. "We had this one guy, who was a Patriots fan, honest to God he sat there and looked at it. He was afraid to touch it. He said, 'Is that mine?' The tears just ran down his face. He couldn't believe it."

"Last June, we went to see the Phillies. There was a family that owns one of the private suites at the stadium that heard the Warrior Weekend gang was coming. They weren't going to use that suite, so they donated the suite to the program. So the troops were living high on the hog," said Mr.

Lafferty. "In fact, there were a few people who had never been to a baseball game before in their life. They

a doctor's appointment or anything else, they were just sitting there. So, he said it would be great to try and get these troops out of here. That's how the whole concept started."

Mr. Lafferty notes that when Walter Reed Army Medical Center closed, they opened a wing at Bethesda and called it the Walter Reed Wing.

"Those troops there unfortunately are bed-ridden. So, we really can't take any of the troops from that facility," he said. "When they graduate from there, they go to Fort Belvoir."

Warrior Weekend works in collaboration with the office events coordinator at Fort Belvoir. Prospective guests are submitted to the legal office and medical staff.

"They don't want us taking them out skydiving or anything like that," Mr. Lafferty said.

Initially, Warrior Weekend was based at Legion Post 28, where Mr.

Lafferty, a Marine who served from 1954-57, served two years as post commander in 2010-11.

said, ‘You actually spoiled us.’ We love baseball now, but that is the only way we are going to go to a game.’” Trips to Philadelphia typically include lodging at the Center City Marriott, a Philly cheesesteak at Pat’s King of Steaks and dinner at Maggiano’s.

“We always have dinner Maggiano’s restaurant,” said Mr. Lafferty.

“You can order family style or off the menu. We order family. We pack up what food is left, and on way back to the hotel, there is a little area they pass with an awful lot of homeless people. They give all the food from Maggiano’s to the homeless. This makes such an impression on the kids.”

In addition, waterproof mats weaved from plastic bags by the Sons of the American Legion Squadron 28 and Auxiliary Unit 28 are given to the homeless.

“This has become a tradition on Friday in Philly,” said Mr. Lafferty.

“The kids see the other side of the world.”

Seeds for Weekend Warrior Program were planted through a contact with the Walter Reed Army Medical Center, which served as the U.S.

Army’s flagship medical center from 1909 to 2011.

“This guy happened to be down there on a weekend. He was retired military, so he had some contacts there. They took him on a little tour of the Walter Reed facility,” Mr.

Lafferty said. “And what he realized is these people are sitting around doing nothing. They didn’t have

“It was under guise of the Post 28 at one time. Then, back in 2013, we decided it should become its own corporation. In 2013, we filed with IRS and got certification as 501(c)(3) as a nonprofit. We set up the incorporation papers and everything in the state of Delaware,” said Mr. Lafferty.

“The membership of the post, they said it was fine to keep the vehicles here.”

Since the state took over the video poker/slot machines, there is some requirement that some of the money that the entities, such as veterans’ organizations, earn from

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One of the highlights of recent Warrior Weekend trips to Philadelphia has been tours of the NFL Films Studio in Mount Laurel, New Jersey. In this photo, three wounded veterans receive authentic helmets of their favorite NFL teams during the tour.

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the machines go to nonprofits, either in actual donations or in-kind donations. “So, they can charge us rent for our vehicles here and meetings and everything else,” said Mr. Lafferty.

in Laurel, St. Paul’s United Methodist Church, and every month they send us \$37.

They say, ‘We have you as one of our missions,’” said Mr. Lafferty. “Another lady, who lives in Philadelphia, she sends us \$50 every month, just like clockwork. I send them personal letters, rather than form letters.”

Donations are tax deductible and can be made online through PayPal on the website — www.warriorweekend.net

net — or by check sent to: Warrior Weekend, P.O. Box 63, Harbeson, DE, 19951.

“That helps them offset their 501(c)(3) requirement with the state.”

Mr. Lafferty emphasizes that Warrior Weekend is not affiliated with any other organization, in particular the Wounded Warrior Project, which in 2016 came under fire amid reports of mismanagement of funds.

“We are not affiliated with anybody,” said Mr. Lafferty.

Royal treatment at ‘home’

In November, troops and family will be get the royal treatment at Post 28 and the area. They receive a salute from the Post 28 Honor Guard and Colorettes, Friday night dinner at the post and a fine restaurant Saturday.

Trips usually include a private tour of Fort Miles and the Air Base Museum in Dover, and some holiday shopping.

There’s also a salute from King — Elvis tribute artist Bob Loughheed.

“Bob does a marvelous job. He salutes the troops and their families,” said Mr. Lafferty. “He’s so warm and compassionate toward these troops and their families, especially if they have children. He brings the children on stage.”

Self-sustaining

A key feature of Warrior Weekend is that it’s self-sustaining and self-supporting, operating with donations from individuals, businesses, companies, corporations and veterans’ organizations. The program is governed by a board of directors and administration and management is conducted by volunteers.

Warrior Weekend’s current board of directors includes Jim Lafferty, president; Jim Gallagher, senior vice president; Scott Underkoffler, vice president; Karen Marvel, secretary/ treasurer; board members — Joe Green, David Radcliff, Ed Feeley, Sam Oliveri, Rod Morgan, Tom Dahl, Garth Miller, Buddy Clark, Ron Webster, Bob Pruchniewski, Pete Glatfelter, Paul Zambito.

“Everyone that works in this program is a volunteer. No one gets a penny,” said Mr. Lafferty. “The compensation and satisfaction we get is looking at the smiles on these troops’ faces and their families. We’ve made an awful lot of friends over the years.

And we’ve maintained contact with a lot of them.”

In addition to generous donations, funds have been raised through mega raffles for Super Bowl tickets/trips and golfer’s dream packages. These fundraisers generate interest through the American Legions across the nation, including Daytona Beach, where Jim Gallagher, the Weekend Warrior senior vice president resides.

Travel mode and feedback

Transportation includes a van, provided by Mumford and Miller Concrete in Middletown, and two trailers. Feedback is welcome through comment sheets. Comments are entered on the Warrior Weekend website, managed by secretary/treasurer Karen Marvel.

“If there is any way we can improve the program, we’d like to see their comments,” said Mr. Lafferty.

Comment Samplings

• **CW4 Donnette Clay (Inner Harbor, Baltimore):** “I could not imagine a better way to celebrate Mother’s Day than an impromptu trip with the family. Warrior Weekend ensured that my visit to the city of Baltimore was exciting, adventurous and fun. I met new people, and I’m sure I made some lifelong friends. This experience will forever be embedded in my children’s memory. I could not ask for a better Mother’s Day. Thank you!”

• **SGT 1st Class Linwood Pender (Philadelphia trip):** “My spouse and I had a very fantastic weekend.

All activities from beginning to end were amazing and well-planned, and we were fed very well. No one went hungry. I was in desperate need of a weekend getaway and rest as part of my healing process. There isn’t anything I would have changed about this outing. We can’t thank you enough for a job well done.”

• **Private Rong Zhang (Philadelphia trip):** “The Philadelphia trip was wonderful. My family and I visited the Phillies office and got up close with the Phillies team. I went to a baseball game for the first time. It gave me a passion for baseball. We had a wonderful and unforgettable weekend. I was also lucky enough to receive an expensive Green Bay Packers helmet!”

• **Sgt. Douglas Lewis (Rehoboth Beach trip):** “This was a great opportunity to hang out with great people.

The best part is that we were not rushed and had full control of what we wanted to do. I wouldn’t change a

Counting transportation, lodging, meals, tickets and related expenses, trips “range anywhere from \$5,000 to \$12,000 a weekend, depending on duration and location,” Mr. Lafferty said. “We pay for everything.”

Community support includes monthly donations. All contributions are acknowledged with a form letter of thanks.

“Every donation regardless of the amount gets a thank you letter,” said Mr. Lafferty. “That has been policy since we started.”

On occasion, thanks are personalized.

“There’s a little church

thing with this program.”

• **Sgt. Althea Williams (Rehoboth trip):** “To the Warrior Weekend team, thank you so much for the wonderful weekend. My daughter and I felt the love. It’s people like you who remind me serving my country was the best decision I could have made.”