



# OHF INTEL

4th Quarter 2022

A Quarterly Report from Operation Healing Forces

## Strengthening The Familial Bonds

*Dear Friends and Supporters of Operation Healing Forces,*

My father was a naval aviator and sea/air rescue helicopter pilot during the Korean War. He once told me how he was “waved off” a downed pilot while investigating a crash somewhere in the Pacific. Close enough to see the upturned face of the survivor, he prepared to send down the basket to pull him to safety. But after confirming the pilot’s country of origin, my father was ordered to abort and head back to the carrier. The rescue and recovery would lead to political implications above his pay grade, as that particular country was not supposed to be “officially” in this conflict. That one decision haunted him for the rest of his life. As most modern-day armed forces members will tell you, no matter the justification of a righteous kill (or, in his case, a decision) the ghosts follow you forever.

The nation rejoices when our special operations forces return home, but for too many of our nation’s bravest, the war never ends. The sacrifices are counted in divorce, suicides, and the permanent loss of inner peace and mental health. At Operation Healing Forces we’re committed to restoring operators adjusting to their new normal and strengthening the familial bonds that have been stretched to the limit and beyond.

We invite you to join our efforts. Whether you donate your vacation home for a therapeutic retreat, volunteer at a fundraiser, make a cash gift or help spread the word about OHF, together we can show our SOF community that we are dedicated to caring for them as they have for us.

*With gratitude,  
Chris Caughran  
Member of the Board  
Operation Healing Forces*



## STRENGTHENING BONDS

Operation Healing Forces helps SOF service members and spouses heal and build stronger connections. According to an OHF Couples Retreat participant survey:

94% of couples reported improved communication

81% continued to communicate with their retreat group 6 months later

81% believe that peer-to-peer exchanges aided in their personal recovery

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# NO ONE LEFT BEHIND

As the mom of a child with special needs, Nealy Ambron of Fayetteville, NC, has grown used to managing her expectations while advocating for her 9-year-old son Zachary, who was diagnosed with microcephaly, a rare neurological condition, and Optic Nerve Hypoplasia soon after he was born. So when the Operation Healing Forces Immediate Needs program came through with an adaptive aquatic wheelchair for Zach that both insurance and Medicaid had previously denied, she was ecstatic.

"Zach loves the water, but he's getting heavy now. The biggest issue taking him to the pool was providing him with the support he needs," says Nealy, who has served in the Army for 19 years and is currently at U.S. Army Special Operations Command.

Although Zach can perceive light, he's completely visually impaired and is developmentally and cognitively delayed. "He is unable to swallow and is fed through a G tube. He hasn't learned yet how his muscles work so he is non-ambulatory and has to be assisted for pretty much everything," Nealy says.

The supportive aquatic chair enables Zach to safely enjoy the pool with the rest of the family.

"Our family is about inclusivity and making sure we can do things together. I don't like the idea of having to leave Zach behind because the accessibility options aren't there," Nealy says, who also has three other children, ages 11, 6, and 3.

**"Now, this is one more thing we can all do together. I don't worry that I'm going to drop him because he's slippery. It's eliminated a lot of stress, increased Zach's quality of life, and created a new activity for us to do together."**



*Zach enjoys the pool in his new aquatic wheelchair with his brother Jonathan.*



*Zach surrounded by dad David, Jonathan, 3, Nealy, Alexander, 11 and Loretta, 6.*

# DEDICATED SUPPORT

When Army Ranger Staff Sergeant Trevor Brunell (R) of Columbus, GA, needed immediate surgery to address a dangerous infection in his leg, he wasn't sure how he would manage the travel expenses to reach his specialist in Ohio. Due to the complicated nature of his reconstructed leg, other surgeons weren't comfortable operating on it.

In the summer of 2016, Trevor was in Afghanistan when his team was ambushed by ISIS militants hiding in an underground tunnel. Trevor sustained machine gun fire that splintered his knee. Pinned down, his company provided cover and put a tourniquet on his leg while awaiting evacuation. "It was extremely hot and because of the tourniquet around my leg, everything below my knee basically cooked off from the sun," Trevor says.

When he arrived at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, Lt. Cmdr. Jason Souza, M.D., considered one of the leading reconstructive surgeons in the world, offered to rebuild Trevor's severely burned leg. Over the next five months, Trevor underwent 33 surgeries and was fitted with an IDEO brace, which helped him run again, get back in shape and redeploy. But another mission-related injury, leading to more surgeries and ongoing infections sidelined him once again, forcing Trevor to medically retire in August.

Within a week of reaching out to Operation Healing Forces Immediate Needs, Trevor and his wife Kara were headed to Dr. Souza (R), now at Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center, with airline tickets, rental car fees, and lodging arrangements covered.

**"I was just amazed. I owe Cher (SOAR program manager) a big thank you," Trevor says. "OHF is definitely dedicated to what they do."**



*Trevor and Kara Brunell.*



Isaac and Jennifer parasailing in Pensacola, FL.

## JOY IN HARD TIMES

of the family arriving in California where Isaac was enrolled in an intense Chinese language school, Jennifer was diagnosed with Stage 3 thyroid cancer. “For the majority of my treatments, Isaac was at my bedside while also trying to study.”

Thanks to an Operation Healing Forces Couples Retreat in Pensacola, FL, the couple was finally able to catch their breath.

“Having a break from the runaround, the weight of being mom and dad all of the time and holding the pieces together—not just physically holding the household together, but juggling all of the kids’ emotions too, was so refreshing,” Jennifer says. “It’s just not something our lifestyle even allows for.”

**“To feel seen and know that someone cares? It makes me cry thinking about it. OHF is a wonderful organization, and we are grateful,” Jennifer says.**

From battening down the hatches for a category 4 typhoon in Okinawa, Japan to homeschooling three children, Jennifer Smith of Yelm, WA, is like many special operations forces spouses. She’s the soldier behind the soldier, resilient, independent, and flexible. Did she realize the lifestyle she was getting into when Isaac, her husband of 19 years, joined the Army 12 years ago?

“I had no idea,” Jennifer says with a chuckle. “When we got stationed in Okinawa, people said, ‘good luck. Most couples there get divorced.’” Due to a lack of a support system, the language barrier, and Isaac’s frequent deployments, “it did take a toll on our marriage,” Jennifer says. “But our husbands are uniquely gifted to do what they do and they love it. You have to be able to find joy in the hard times.”

The hard times didn’t end in Japan. Within weeks



# LIFE-CHANGING RETREAT

As an army aviator, Ben Buzek, of Toano, VA, is normally away from his wife Aimee and their three children for a cumulative 200-300 days each year for training missions and combat deployments. Then COVID hit. Due to a mandatory 90-day lockdown, Ben spent the most consecutive days he's ever spent with his family. For the first time, the couple, who has been married for 16 years, got a glimpse into "normal" family life.

"We actually had time together to get to know each other all over again, to bond as a unit and as a family," Aimee says. "Previously, it was the glamour and the glory of the goodbyes and the hellos, and it opened our eyes to what it's like to have somebody at home every night."

They learned from their lockdown experience that "at the heart of our home



*Ben and Aimee in Trout Creek, MT.*

is our marriage. It's the foundation for everything else and if we're not protecting that foundation, it's going to struggle," Ben says.

Carrying forth that spirit minus the distractions and stressors of work and family life, Ben and Aimee embraced the opportunity to attend the Operation Healing Forces Couples Retreat in Trout Creek, MT in September. The retreat, which they described as life-changing, provided a soft landing for the couple. They reconnected while meeting new friends, hiking, and watching the sunrise.

**"Trout Creek has a certain amount of quiet I've never heard in my life," Aimee says. "We didn't know how much we needed that."**



# DONOR SPOTLIGHT

## The Leclerc Family Owners of the International Diamond Center



(Pictured L to R): Brian Leclerc, Danielle Leclerc Masters, Ashely Leclerc Stamey, Brian Stamey, Peggy Leclerc, Tony Markel, Gary Markel, Keith Leclerc, and Chad Masters.

### *A Heart for Giving*

We are honored and excited to announce that Keith and Peggy Leclerc and their family, owners of the International Diamond Center, have gifted Operation Healing Forces with a generous \$50,000 donation. The Leclerc's exceptional gift, made through their Fifth C Foundation, will be instrumental as we further expand our mission to provide connection, healing and immediate needs outreach to the special operations forces community.

The Leclerc family presented the check to OHF founders Tony and Gary Markel at International Diamond Center's VIP Opening Event in Naples, FL, on November 10. It's the family's third generous gift in as many years.

Married for 44 years with three children, Keith and Peggy's story exemplifies the American dream. With an entrepreneurial spirit that included tenacity, hard work and a gift for building strong relationships, Keith grew from an outsider in the jewelry industry to become one of the most respected diamond buyers in the world.

Guided by the motto "to whom much is given, much is expected," Keith says the success of his precious gemstone business has inspired him and his family to create a legacy that will make a critical difference in the lives of children and families for years to come.

**"The mission of Operation Healing Forces is near and dear to our hearts. The nature of the work that special ops service members do on behalf of our country carries with it an incredible amount of sacrifice that often goes unacknowledged," says Keith, who has been a member of the Operation Healing Forces Board of Directors for five years. "I'm proud that our family can help support OHF's mission to heal and strengthen the essential relationships that are integral to the overall well-being of the SOF community."**

# CONNECT WITH OHF

## Help expand OHF's impact – Please share this newsletter.

Help spread the word about Operation Healing Forces and the battles faced by our nation's special operations forces. Forward this newsletter to a friend, relative, or colleague today. You may end up connecting OHF with its next donor, supporter, or recipient family.

*"A dear friend of mine introduced me to OHF, and after participating in several events with some of the SOF active duty and veterans, I knew that the best way to honor my recently deceased husband, (a veteran 82nd Airborne Division Paratrooper and Ranger) was to get involved with OHF. There is so much competition for charitable dollars, I'm confident that OHF is the most direct and effective way to support our active duty, veterans, and their families."*

— OHF Supporter Robin Howell, Owner of Crimson Capital

## Helping SOF SOAR

Now more than ever, SOF couples need your support. OHF continues to expand its support for immediate needs, crisis needs, career transitions, employment, caregivers and spouses, and financial planning. To contribute or learn more about these programs, please contact SOAR Program Manager **Tiers Arnts** at [Tiers.Arnts@ophf.org](mailto:Tiers.Arnts@ophf.org) or (253) 241-7271.

### SOAR (Special Operations Additional Resources) Program

#### OHF's SOAR Offers:

- OHF Employment Services
- Alumni Support
- Financial Planning
- Immediate Needs Crisis Assistance
- SOF Caregiver & Spouse Retreats
- Ambassador Dinners
- Counseling Assistance Program

## A Home for Healing:

The phenomenal growth in our retreat numbers means more couples can participate. This growth also means that Operation Healing Forces needs homes to house our heroes and their spouses.

Providing a home for an OHF retreat is an unforgettable gift and an extremely rewarding way to support SOF couples.

#### OUR NEED:

5-bedroom, 5-bathroom homes at destination locales throughout North America.

#### TIMING:

Retreats take place over 5 days. We have immediate needs for retreat locations in 2023 and beyond.



#### LEARN MORE:

Contact **Kerry Irvin** at [kerry.irvin@ophf.org](mailto:kerry.irvin@ophf.org) to learn more about opening your home to our nation's special operators and their spouses.



## Mutually Beneficial

Aside from helping support a worthy cause, stock donations can maximize the value of a gift to both the charitable recipient and the donor. Compared with selling appreciated securities and donating the after-tax net proceeds, a direct gift of stock has the potential to increase the net proceeds to the charity and maximize a donor's tax deduction.

When donating appreciated securities (e.g., stocks, bonds, mutual funds, etc.) with long-term holding periods of one year or more, the amount of the donor's tax deduction is equal to the average value of the high and low price of the securities on the date of the gift. You may generally deduct up to 30% of your Adjusted Gross Income for contributions of appreciated securities held more than one year.

Donating stock to charity is as easy as calling your financial advisor and providing transfer instructions. To learn how to make a stock donation for Operation Healing Forces, visit **<https://OperationHealingForces.org/Donate>** or contact **Kerry Irvin** at **[kerry.irvin@ophf.org](mailto:kerry.irvin@ophf.org)**.

## Giving to Operation Healing Forces is Easier Than Ever!

Simply scan or click on the  
OHF QR Code to make a  
contribution right away!



# More Ways You Can Help!



## Cash Contributions

100% goes to program costs thanks to our board of directors covering all overhead expenses.



2 **Donate a 5 bedroom/5 bath home for a week**



3 **Host an in-home reception** introducing OHF's mission to your friends and neighbors.



4 **Donate your Airline Miles**  
It's easy. Call or email Desiree Holley to find out how, (813) 480-6078 [desiree.holley@ophf.org](mailto:desiree.holley@ophf.org).



5 **Donate through Amazon Smile**  
Search for Operation Healing Forces at [smile.amazon.com](https://smile.amazon.com), and Amazon will donate a portion of sales to OHF.

OHF's retreats, Immediate Needs, and other programs are especially meaningful and healing to the special operations forces community because these opportunities are offered at no cost to the participants. By alleviating the burden of financial stress, deserving elite warriors and their families can access much-needed respite and focus on restoring and strengthening each other's bonds which makes a significant difference in the healing process.

OHF's transformative programs are only possible thanks to our partnership with dedicated donors like you. As you consider making a tax-deductible donation to OHF to aid the special operations community, do so with the confidence that **100% of your donation** will go toward supporting our programs. This unique assurance is possible because of the committed support of our board of directors, who personally cover every penny of OHF's overhead expenses. *That means every dollar you give will go directly toward special operators and their families.*

## Thank you for your support!



OHF has achieved Charity Navigator's top ranking of Four Stars. Described as "Exceptional" - Exceeds industry standards and outperforms most charities in its cause.



OHF has achieved the GuideStar Platinum Seal of Transparency Rating, the top 0.1% of the nation's non-profit organizations in terms of transparency.



OHF received the "Top Rated" rating by Great Nonprofits. Rated highly by people who experience their work firsthand - clients served, volunteers and donors.

## Thank you for supporting Operation Healing Forces

### Comments? Questions?

Please tell us what you think about our quarterly newsletter. Direct questions, comments, or to unsubscribe, e-mail us at: [info@ophf.org](mailto:info@ophf.org) or by mail to:

**Operation Healing Forces**  
5100 West Kennedy Blvd, Suite 100, Tampa, FL 33609  
(727) 221-5071



**Creating Bonds That Cure**  
[www.operationhealingforces.org](http://www.operationhealingforces.org)

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