



OHF INTEL

4th Quarter 2020

A Quarterly Report: Donor Spotlight Edition

Statistics Cannot Begin To Tell The Story

Dear Friends and Supporters of Operation Healing Forces,

Throughout this year, I have been inspired by the strength of our nation's Special Operations Forces (SOF). In a report released in October, the Department of Defense revealed that suicides for active-duty military members increased again in 2019. Pentagon leaders are expressing new concern about this trend during a particularly stressful year, according to the U.S. Naval Institute.

Of course, statistics cannot begin to tell the story of the impact of suicide on military spouses and families. As you'll read in this edition of INTEL, SOF families face unique challenges, including loss, disruption, and injury. In my years of work with SOF families through Operation Healing Forces, I continue to notice that they face these challenges with resolve, resilience, and bravery.

More than ever, I am grateful to our steadfast donors and supporters. Thanks to our generous contributors, this year OHF provided restorative retreats along with financial help for immediate needs, career assistance for transitioning and veteran special operators, community engagement for OHF alumni, and more.

In this newsletter, you'll meet families facing medical problems, life transitions, and significant losses. In each situation, OHF helped transform their experience, not only by providing tangible assistance, but by offering a much-needed network of relational and emotional support.

This healing work would not be possible without your help. Thank you for helping OHF provide, in the words of a recent retreat participant, a "light at the end of the tunnel."

Very Respectfully,
Gary Markel
Chairman and Founder,
Operation Healing Forces



We identified a consistent pattern of health-care difficulties within the special operation forces community that we and other special operation forces health-care providers have termed "Operator Syndrome." This includes interrelated health and functional impairments including traumatic brain injury effects; endocrine dysfunction; sleep disturbance; obstructive sleep apnea; chronic joint/back pain, orthopedic problems, and headaches; substance abuse; depression and suicide; anger; worry, rumination, and stress reactivity; marital, family, and community dysfunction; problems with sexual health and intimacy; being "on guard" or hypervigilant; memory, concentration, and cognitive impairments; vestibular and vision impairments; challenges of the transition from military to civilian life; and common existential issues.

From a 2020 study on "Operator Syndrome" published in The International Journal of Psychiatry in Medicine

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Jordan and Sasha Ailie

The 2020 Operation Healing Forces retreat in the Dominican Republic came at the perfect time for Jordan and Sasha Ailie. After 13 years with Marines and Navy Special Operations Forces, Jordan was recovering from neck surgery and transitioning to civilian life. The family had just moved from Virginia Beach to San Diego to start a new chapter with their two young children in tow. “I was just coming off active duty and moving across the country. We moved ourselves with a six-month-old,” says Jordan. “Needless to say, we weren’t getting any sleep.”

The tropical town of Punta Cana provided a restorative, therapeutic backdrop

“Having something like this to look forward to is incredible, especially in a year like 2020...”

To support retreat experiences like this one for SOF couples, please contact info@ophf.org.

LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL:

Jordan and Sasha Ailie

for the retreat. The couple perused a local bazaar, took surfing lessons, explored local reefs with a SCUBA dive instructor, enjoyed a couple’s massage, and got to know their fellow retreat participants.

Connecting with other SOF couples across the military career spectrum offered the ideal transition to a new life stage, says Jordan. “It was a great battery recharge, and it gave us the chance to meet other couples at different stages of military and family life.”

Surfing together was a trip highlight for Jordan, who was interested in learning but never had the time during his military career. Post-retreat, OHF program manager and retreat lead Rob Kilmartin helped Jordan connect to a local surf instructor in San Diego to keep his momentum going.

Experiences like this one give military couples “a light at the end of the tunnel,” says Jordan. “Having something like this to look forward to is incredible, especially in a year like 2020 with all of its challenges and uncertainties. Now that we know about OHF, we look forward to sharing it with other couples and giving back to support the cause.”



ROLE MODELS: Ken and Michelle Shell

Bicycling around Michigan's Mackinac Island was a highlight of September's Operational Healing Forces retreat for Ken and Michelle Shell. Ziplining, fishing, and horseback riding rounded out the retreat's active agenda. But the week's top moment came when the Shells and their fellow attendees met Paul and Melissa Kieswetter, the owners of the farm where the retreat took place.

"It was an amazing, emotional experience to sit with these people who are so generous, and who truly want to help."

"Before the retreat, I didn't realize that there were people out there like them," says Michelle. "They were sweet, funny, and down to earth."

Since the retreat, Michelle and Melissa have been in touch via email, Michelle says. "Melissa emailed me to reach out after we got home. Paul spent a short time in the military, so they have some idea of what we've experienced, and they really care about giving back."

The couple has also stayed in touch with the other couples they met on the farm, says Ken. "We ended up on the retreat with other couples around our age, and that made it easy to connect. We all got along really well."

The retreat capped off a long phase of recovery and rehabilitation for Ken, an Army Special Forces engineer based in Colorado Springs,



Ken and Michelle Shell

Colorado. After a 2019 improvised explosive device (IED) blast in Afghanistan, he spent a month in the hospital and the rest of the year in physical therapy. "I lost about 20 percent of the skin on the backs of my legs, broke my clavicle, and had nerve and tendon damage in my hands from shrapnel."

For months after the explosion, Ken was in too much pain to enjoy things like bicycling or ziplining. Finally seeing Ken happy and relaxed was unforgettable, says Michelle. "It was great to see that he'd healed enough to enjoy himself during this retreat. He wasn't in constant pain, which made a huge difference."

Meeting and thanking Paul and Melissa face-to-face was the perfect capstone to the week, says Ken. "I can't say thank you enough. This took such a burden off us. We're grateful to have had this opportunity."

*For more information on
donating a home or property
for an OHF retreat, contact
Jim Zuba at jim.zuba@ophf.org.*



Retreat attendees with Paul and Melissa Kieswetter, owners of Maple River Farm.

ON THE MOVE: Mark and Courtney Carreon



Maverick Carreon on the family's new floor, courtesy of OHF.

"From the retreat to the flooring, it was like a set of dominos with things falling into place. It's been incredible for our family in ways I can't put into words."

To learn more about OHF's Immediate Needs Program, contact Stephanie DeZern at stephanie.dezern@ophf.org.

Maverick Carreon's world got a lot bigger this year. The one-year-old son of Mark and Courtney Carreon of Chesapeake, Virginia, Maverick was born with a genetic disorder that hampered his ability to walk. With the help of a physical therapist, Maverick was making gains, but not enough to move independently, says Courtney.

His physical therapist recommended more walking practice to improve Maverick's mobility. But his gait trainer, a specialized four-wheeled walker, confined the toddler to a 30-square-foot area on the first floor of their home, severely limiting his ability to get the practice he needed.

"The gait trainer only moves freely on hard floors, so carpeting or any type of lip or ledge between floors is a huge impediment. His therapist recommended getting hard floors installed throughout the first floor so he could move freely—otherwise it was very difficult to motivate him to walk," Courtney says.

The couple attended an Operation Healing Forces retreat in Florida this August but didn't know about any of its additional programs. They were looking into personal loans for the flooring when OHF offered help via its Immediate Needs Program, says Courtney. "We got in touch with Stephanie DeZern from Operation Healing Forces, and within a few days we had estimates for flooring."

Within a month, the family had new floors installed, giving Maverick a smooth surface for his gait trainer along with the freedom to move around the home. The difference in Maverick's mobility was almost immediate. "Before the new floors, he wasn't even taking steps," says Courtney. "Within two or three days, he walked all the way across the living room into the kitchen. Now, he can walk across the room to play with his sister, which is even more motivation for him."

Watching Maverick embrace his new freedom is rewarding beyond words, says Mark, a Navy SEAL in the process of medically retiring from the military. "It's hard to describe how much this has truly benefited our family, especially during this time of transition," he says. "From the retreat to the flooring, it was like a set of dominos with things falling into place. It's been incredible for our family in ways I can't put into words."

STRENGTH AFTER SUICIDE:

Geniece Baer

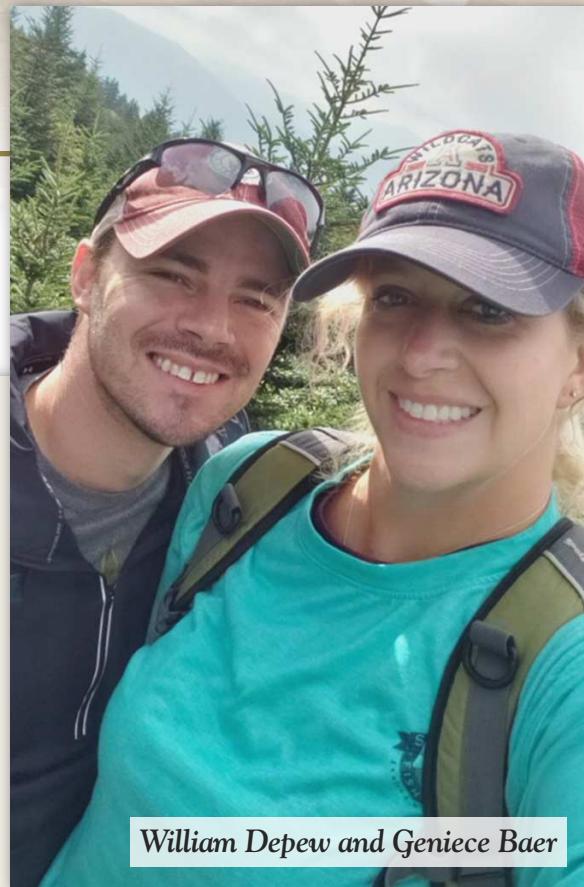
After just three months of marriage, Geniece Baer lost her husband to suicide. Special Operator William Depew died on June 9 at the age of 35 after struggling with lingering injuries and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). “When he came back from his last deployment, he had a concussion and issues with his hip,” says Geniece. “I knew he was struggling, and we were in the process of getting him help for PTSD.”

Her own struggle was just beginning. Due to a paperwork oversight, the military failed to recognize Geniece as William’s spouse after his death. That meant that Geniece wasn’t eligible to receive any of the support designated for military spouses after a service member dies, she says. “Because our marriage was so new and this all happened during COVID, our paperwork hadn’t been updated since to show that I was his wife. So the military didn’t recognize me as his wife.”

Suddenly, the 37-year-old widow found herself without any income during the summer months, when she didn’t receive her normal salary as a schoolteacher. “Thankfully, William’s brother’s wife made it her mission to help me during that time,” says Geniece.

Her sister-in-law Katie Depew began searching for organizations that might be able to help Geniece, but some were non-starters. “We found out that some organizations wouldn’t help me because William died by suicide—they’ll only help widows if the service member dies in the line of duty. I felt like there was this shame around suicide, and I was on my own.”

Soon, Geniece connected with Operation Healing Forces, one of the organizations Katie



William Depew and Geniece Baer

recommended. Right away, OHF’s Immediate Needs Program offered to cover Geniece’s mortgage, car payments, and travel costs for William’s funeral, which took place in Illinois. “They even made sure I had a nice dress to wear for his service,” says Geniece.

The program did much more than simply write a check, she notes. “Not only did Stephanie provide so much emotional support, she did all the legwork for me. She even booked my hotel for the trip, so all I had to do was get there. It took a burden off my plate during such a difficult time.”

“What I really want people to know is this: OHF helps real people get through those hard moments in life, without judgement. I know because I’ve experienced it,” says Geniece. “There are so many organizations out there claiming to help service members or veterans. But I know firsthand that with OHF, that money is going straight to the families of soldiers.”

**“What I really want people to know is this:
OHF helps real people get through those
hard moments in life, without judgement.”**

To learn more about OHF’s Immediate Needs Program, contact Stephanie DeZern at stephanie.dezern@ophf.org.

DONOR SPOTLIGHT

GIVING BACK: Keith Leclerc



Peggy and Keith Leclerc

"Operation Healing Forces has an amazing model, and an incredible team that really takes its mission to heart."

To learn more about The Fifth C, an International Diamond Center (IDC) Foundation, contact helen.barrott@shopIDC.com.

Clarity is an important indicator of quality for diamonds—and charitable organizations. Just ask Keith Leclerc, Operation Healing Forces board member and president of International Diamond Center in Clearwater, Florida.

For Leclerc, OHF's practice of using all donated funds to directly benefit Special Operations families shows rare, valuable transparency. "As the growth of our business provides more opportunity to give, we want to make sure that our donations are helping the people we want to help, instead of going to fund administrative expenses," he says. "Operation Healing Forces has an amazing model, and an incredible team that really takes its mission to heart."

Four years ago, Leclerc agreed to serve on OHF's board to help the organization expand its impact and reach more Special Operations Forces' families, he says. "We really want to be able to do more for a larger group of people."

Learning from the wisdom, experience, and perspectives of his fellow OHF board members has been an unexpected benefit, he adds. "We have a tremendous board with very experienced people who run large companies.

Just listening to different perspectives has influenced how I've organized my own family foundation. I would say I've gotten more out of it than I've given."

Leclerc recently formed his own family foundation to help his family give more strategically. "We had about 140 different organizations we were giving to, and we wanted to do something different," he says. "Our hearts are with the military, first responders, and children, and that's where we've chosen to give."

After streamlining the family's charitable giving, Leclerc feels even more aligned with OHF's mission. "Operation Healing Forces is one of the organizations we've chosen to continue working with. The military sacrifice so much; their children sacrifice too," says Leclerc. "We're proud to support a very special group of people who have done so much for the citizens of this country."

CONNECT WITH OHF

Please Consider Supporting OHF

Helping SOF SOAR

Now more than ever, SOF couples need your support. In 2020, OHF is expanding its support for immediate needs, crisis needs, career transitions, employment, caregivers and spouses, and financial planning. To contribute or learn more these programs, please contact SOAR Program Manager Stephanie DeZern at stephanie.dezern@ophf.org or (619) 316-7043.

SOAR (Special Operations Additional Resources) Programs

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

A Home for Healing:

Operation Healing Forces staff plan, implement, and personally oversee incredible, once-in-a-lifetime retreats for our couples. Every detail, every meal, and every activity are planned to maximize our participants' relaxation, healing, and personal and relational growth. But our retreats can't take place without the homes provided by generous donors.

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; just ask Ken and Michelle Shell, who shared their experience on page three of this newsletter.



OUR NEED:

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

TIMING:

Retreats take place over 7-days. We have immediate needs for retreat locations in 2020 and beyond.

LEARN MORE:

Contact Jim Zuba at jim.zuba@ophf.org to learn more about opening your home or how else you can aid our nation's Special Operators and their families.

Four Ways You Can Help!



- 1** **Cash Contributions**
(100% to program costs)



- 2** **Donate a 5 bedroom/
5 bath Home for a Week**



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



- 4** **Donate through Amazon Smile**
Search for Operation Healing Forces at
smile.amazon.com, and Amazon will
donate a portion of sales to OHF.

A major reason OHF retreats, Immediate Needs, and other programs OHF offers to support the Special Operations community mean so much and are so healing is because they are offered at no cost to the participants. This provides deserving elite warriors and their families much needed respite to fully relax, focus on one another, alleviate financial stress and burden, and greatly aids in their healing process.

Offering these restorative, life-changing programs takes the support of dedicated donors like you. Please consider making a tax deductible donation to OHF to support the special operations community. Please note, all donations go 100% to program costs to support our special operators and their families as Gary & Tony Markel personally cover 100% of OHF's overhead expenses. *Every dollar you give will go directly towards benefiting Special Operators and their families.*



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 first hand - clients served, volunteers and donors.

Thank you for your support of 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 or by mail to:

Operation Healing Forces
380 Park Place Blvd, Suite 175, Clearwater, FL 33759
(727) 221-5071



Creating bonds that cure.

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