

Empowered through mentorship

First mentorship retreat changes, fulfills lives

By Bryan G. Lett

Mentoring carries numerous immediate and long-term benefits for both the mentor and mentee. From school-aged children to working professionals, a positive mentorship experience can often mean enhanced chances for success, achievement and a life of growth and fulfillment. The same holds true for many of America's veterans, who face new obstacles following a devastating injury or illness. Thrust back into the civilian world, these veterans benefit greatly from interaction with their peers.

To provide present-day injured veterans with the best mentors possible, DAV created a mentorship program that pairs them with injured veterans from past wars who have not only overcome perceived limitations, but also went on to lead successful and high-quality lives for many years. Partnering with the Gary Sinise Foundation and the Boulder Crest Retreat for Military and Veteran Wellness, in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains, DAV held its first mentorship retreat weekend in July, which brought together four disabled post-9/11 veterans with two disabled pre-9/11 veterans.

"The setup for the program is awesome," said Army veteran Chris Walker, a post-9/11 participant who transitioned out of the Army in 2014. He lost his right leg and a good portion of both his arms after being injured by an improvised explosive device (IED). "Listening to injured veterans who have lived it for years means a lot. When you hear them talk about their struggles, you realize you're not alone. They're people in the same boat but have lived it a lot longer, so their ideas carry much more weight."

The five-day retreat included various activities and classes, including role-playing exercises, financial-management classes, numerous mentoring sessions and even some archery. All of the mentors, participants and their caregivers stayed in one of Boulder Crest Retreat's four fully equipped, ADA-accessible cabins.

"Mentorship is a positive way to deal with injuries for a long time," said retreat chairman and founder Ken Falke,



Participants in the first mentorship retreat gather outside the Heroes Garden at the Boulder Crest Retreat in Bluemont, Va. Back row (from left): mentor and DAV National Senior Vice Commander Dave Riley, JB Kerns and Nick Kimmel. Front row (from left): Chris Walker, Michael Frazier and mentor and DAV Past National Commander Jim Sursely.

a DAV life member. "Everybody who comes here leaves with a different outlook. One thing that particularly stuck out to me about the retreat with DAV was seeing a Vietnam veteran like Jim Sursely speaking to this generation's veterans and seeing them actively listening and living in the present and focusing on their future."

The retreat has been open just over two years and has already hosted 1,400 guests. It's the first private wellness center in the country serving active-duty, reserve and National Guard personnel, veterans and their family members.

"This is the very essence of what DAV is all about," said National Commander Moses A. McIntosh Jr. "To see our members putting up such a great effort to enable their fellow veterans to lead fulfilled lives is just inspiring."

"Boulder Crest—I can't say enough about my experience there," said Marine veteran Michael J. Frazier, who served in Afghanistan and was medically retired in 2012.

Both of Frazier's legs were amputated, and he received an injury to his right arm after stepping on a pressure-plated IED. "I learned a lot from the mentors. They taught that it is possible to live a long and fulfilling life with severe injuries." ■