NATIONAL ACTIVITIES, PEER SUPPORT AND RESOURCES FOR MILITARY HEROES AND THEIR FAMILIES

2015 ANNUAL REPORT
Active Heroes’ mission is to support U.S. military service members, veterans and their families through physical, educational, and emotional programs providing coping skills in an effort to eliminate suicide.

2015 Board of Directors
Anne Adkins
Todd Dunn
Mike Griffith
Scott Krueger, Chairman of the Board
Jorge Pazmiño
Bob Taylor
Troy Yocum, President

Jason Brangers
Dustin Frankenfield
Lee Heironimus
Jean MacTarnahan, Secretary
John Pringle
Mareike Yocum, VP of Programs
Natalie Wells

2015 Board of Advisors
Ted E. Crawford
Jayme Perez
Shannon Walkowiak

In Memory of
Justin Finch

ACTIVE HEROES’ VISION IS TO ELIMINATE MILITARY/VETERAN SUICIDE.
Twenty-two veterans per day commit suicide.

One U.S. veteran attempts suicide every 80 minutes.

Military suicides increased during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

From 2009-2011, a record numbers of veterans attempted suicide.

2015 was a memorable year for Active Heroes. We continued to create unique ways to combat the stress, depression and trigger points many of our veterans and their families’ experience. Our focus in 2015 was on the development of the first cabin at the Military Family Retreat Center, opening our Military Family Community Center, and expanding our national events into life-saving networks.

We were deeply saddened by the passing of Active Heroes Board Member Justin Fitch, who passed away in October of 2015. Justin was a key supporter of Active Heroes, and our mission was his passion. His dream of building the first cabin at the retreat center was embraced by our supporters and became a reality by the end of 2015. His vision for building the retreat center will continue to be a driving force as we move forward. We are already working toward developing the second cabin and will begin construction for our Welcome Center in early 2016.

While we built the cabin, the retreat remained open to veterans and military families. Nearly 900 veterans and 1,500 military family members visited the retreat this second year of being open. Many of the veterans used the archery range, hiking trails and ATVs or sought out peaceful time in the “Healing Areas.”

The Military Family Community Center officially opened March 1, 2015. With the opening of the community center, Active Heroes unveiled a long list of free activities for military families. Instantly we filled up openings and appointments for acupuncture, massage therapy, reiki therapy and family nights. Toward the end of 2015, we offered free music lessons through the SOAR program. Through a partnership with the Kentucky Humane Society, we hosted one-of-a-kind veteran dog fostering programs and dog training.

Our dedication to the veteran community continued with partnerships such as the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) and Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association, who held their monthly meetings at our facility. The Active Heroes Community Center was a low-cost solution to serving more veterans and their families. The results within the first nine months are outstanding, and we plan to develop the program more in 2016 as we prepare to expand to other cities within the next 5 years.

We accomplished a major change in how we hosted Active Challenge events across the United States in 2015. In addition to offering an option to participate in an event for free, we added ambassador packages to help individuals learn and spread awareness about veteran suicides. We also added additional suicide prevention training for team leaders and gym owners so these volunteers could support individuals in need. These new changes created more camaraderie and larger support networks within our events. By the end of 2015, we more than doubled our attendance of veterans and military family members at events and expanded to reach more veterans.

Active Heroes has an important mission that will continue in 2016. We are growing our national network of support for veterans and will continue to change and save lives in 2016. Development of the Military Family Retreat Center and Military Family Community Center programs will continue, so we can serve even more veterans for years to come. We look forward to serving veterans and military families near and far in incredible ways!

Sincerely,

Troy Yocum
Founder and President, Active Heroes
CARRY THE FALLEN EVENTS
HELP SUICIDAL VETERANS

Active Heroes’ Carry The Fallen events continue to be the cornerstone of our efforts to raise funding to prevent veteran suicides. These events, which entail teams carrying 50 plus pounds, take place all over the country and are free to any veterans, military families or supporters who want to participate.

Active Heroes staff assist Carry the Fallen team leaders in suicide prevention training, provide materials and instructions for determining when veterans are suicidal and steps to assist those veterans.

More than 2,000 people participated in 68 Carry The Fallen events in 2015. Fundraisers participating in Carry The Fallen raised more than $315,000 for the Active Heroes Retreat Center. Active Heroes is proud to report that there were 186 cases where we were able to assist suicidal veterans who received assistance from our Carry The Fallen Team Leaders and peer mentors.

This year, a group of more than 40 men, women and children walked 139 miles from Fort Campbell, KY to just outside of Fort Knox, KY. The group took back roads and streets through several Kentucky towns to complete their ruck march. Friendships were forged, endurance was tested, and songs were sung. The team endured frigid temperatures and some rough terrain on the route.

Erika Christiansen joined the ruck march to support our men and women in uniform. The walk to Fort Knox was her first ruck march in support of Carry The Fallen and Active Heroes.

“During the march I got to hear stories of those who were able to pull themselves out of the darkness. With tears in their eyes they talked about their brothers and sisters who died not in war but by their own hand,” she said. “I carried a ruck for 18 miles straight, but these men have been carrying the weight of their own demons and those of their fallen comrades for years. From that moment forward, my mission isn’t to sit back and hope but to ruck up and be the change.”

Three soldiers who work at the U.S. Army Research Institute of Environmental Medicine at Natick Soldier Systems Center completed 200 miles of a ruck march from Boston to New York to raise awareness of veteran suicides.

Kristen Heavens, a Reserve first lieutenant, Staff Sgt. Shaun Morand and Spc. Sonya Edler were part of a relay team from Active Heroes’ Carry the Fallen Team Minuteman, which left Sept. 8, and shared the 220-mile march from Boston to New York with about 50 pounds on their backs. Their ruck march symbolically covers 10 miles for each of the 22 daily suicides, and it took place during National Suicide Prevention Week. Heavens said that Carry the Fallen ruck marches are about focusing attention on veteran suicides.

“ONE OF THE BIGGEST THINGS I ALWAYS SAY IS, ‘EVERYBODY HAS THEIR BAGGAGE – IT’S ALL HOW YOU CARRY IT,’” HEAVENS SAID. “AND THIS IS TO SYMBOLIZE THAT WE’LL CARRY IT WITH YOU. WE WANT TO HELP YOU, AND WE’RE HERE FOR YOU.”
On Aug. 22 at 12:22 p.m., more than 165 gyms across America hosted the WOD (Workout of the Day) to End Veteran Suicide event in support of Active Heroes. The events shared a common layout: 22 repetitions of 22 exercises to remember the 22 veterans that take their own lives each day.

The events also raised more than $105,000 toward the development of the Active Heroes Retreat Center. Upon hearing of the event through social media, Rhonda Anderson, a member of CrossFit U-Town, became immediately passionate about organizing the WOD To End Veteran Suicide.

“This event touched home with me because PTSD is prominent in my family,” she said. “I needed to see what I was investing my heart and soul into, and it was humbling.”

Active Heroes estimates that more than 8,000 people participated in the event, which included a lot of civilians who learned for the first time about the veteran suicide epidemic.

“Bringing awareness to the people of our gym is what has been great. Now people know it’s an issue and know that there is something they can do to help,” said Travis Cain, WOD Team Leader, Active Duty Green Beret and Owner of Royal Gorge CrossFit.

Because the event was such a success, Active Heroes plans to now do it twice a year.

“I received a purple heart in Iraq and along the road suffered from PTSD, TBI and a left leg injury,” said WOD participant Jeff Taylor of Sparta, NJ. “I’m medically retired and this will really help me have a purpose.”
Lifelong friends for a wonderful cause,” said Sandy Burgess, a volunteer and mother of the Marine who stood in Raleigh. The Stand At Attention Competition is held each year in memory of Navy Veteran Philip Bordeaux, who stood for Navy the first year of the competition. Bordeaux passed away in 2013 after a car accident on a highway near the Naples, Italy base support site.

After joining the Navy in 2009, Bordeaux, of Durham, NC, was assigned to Norfolk, VA, as a harbor security coxswain. He arrived in Naples in June 2012 and worked his way up from patrol officer to patrol supervisor. At the time of his death, Bordeaux was working on his watch commander qualification, a position normally filled by a first-class petty officer. Bordeaux often volunteered during off-duty hours, working local events around Halloween and Christmas for Active Heroes. While in Norfolk in 2011, he was a co-founder of a fundraiser in which members of the four armed services stood at attention, at length, in a public place for donations.

Each year, fellow sailors in Naples and many more people across America perform the Stand at Attention Competition, in Bordeaux's honor.

“I do the Stand At Attention event each year in the hopes that if I can prevent one more military family from dealing with the effects of their loved one's suicide, then this is worth more to me than the money that is raised,” said Patty Owen, Stand Team Leader and Navy mom.

With the help of about 50 gyms across the United States, local and national supporters, and the United States Coast Guard, a goal to lift 22 million pounds was well exceeded on Nov. 11, 2015 during the Active Heroes Pound Challenge event. The goal was set high, but supporters poured in from across the nation to raise awareness about the reality of veteran suicide.

Nearly 29 million pounds were lifted, which is the equivalent of roughly 245 Boeing-747 airliners, and about $16,000 was raised during this Veteran’s Day event. Donations will be used to support Active Heroes’ programs designed to combat veteran suicide.

“Pound Challenge created an opportunity for everyday people like myself to get involved with an important cause,” said Dallas Robinson, US Olympian and National Guardsman. “The number of people who contributed really showed how many people out there care for this cause and this organization.”

Active Heroes Event Manager for the Pound Challenge, Jeremy Sneed, was elated to see the event bring so much awareness for veteran suicide.

“It was so amazing to see gyms supporting Active Heroes from all over the country, especially when our cause is such an under acknowledged topic,” he said.

“WE FILLED THE STUDIO BEYOND CAPACITY WITH OUR VOLUNTEERS AND SUPPORTERS, WHICH WAS SOMETHING WAVE3 HAD NEVER SEEN BEFORE WITH A TELETHON,” SNEED SAID.

The telethon-style event took place at WAVE3 studios in Louisville, KY and was so successful thanks to numerous volunteers and gym partners.

TAkINg A STAND TO CALL ATTENTION TO VETERAN SUICIDES

Active Heroes’ annual Stand At Attention Competition grew to 10 locations in 2015, including Raleigh NC, its main base, Harrisburg, PA, Minneapolis, MN, Kennesaw, GA, Winston-Salem, NC, Houston, TX, Corpus Christi, TX, Nashville, TN, Philadelphia, PA and Wilmington, NC. Each event location averaged 20,000 visitors.

During the Stand at Attention events, members from the Navy, Army, Air Force, Coast Guard and Marines compete to see who can stand at attention the longest. Participants start at 10 am and stand until the last person is standing or 8 pm, whichever comes first. Donations received by each branch help military families in need, in 2015 the Navy had the most donations.

“To come from out of state, not knowing a soul and join a family of military members of all branches and feel like it was a family reunion - I highly recommend folks to get involved with this event. It was a very memorable time, and we made lifelong friends for a wonderful cause,” said Sandy Burgess, a volunteer and mother of the Marine who stood in Raleigh.

The Stand At Attention Competition is held each year in memory of Navy Veteran Philip Bordeaux, who stood for Navy the first year of the competition. Bordeaux passed away in 2013 after a car accident on a highway near the Naples, Italy base support site.

After joining the Navy in 2009, Bordeaux, of Durham, NC, was assigned to Norfolk, VA, as a harbor security coxswain. He arrived in Naples in June 2012 and worked his way up from patrol officer to patrol supervisor. At the time of his death, Bordeaux was working on his watch commander qualification, a position normally filled by a first-class petty officer.

Bordeaux often volunteered during off-duty hours, working local events around Halloween and Christmas for Active Heroes. While in Norfolk in 2011, he was a co-founder of a fundraiser in which members of the four armed services stood at attention, at length, in a public place for donations.

Each year, fellow sailors in Naples and many more people across America perform the Stand at Attention Competition, in Bordeaux’s honor.

“I do the Stand At Attention event each year in the hopes that if I can prevent one more military family from dealing with the effects of their loved one's suicide, then this is worth more to me than the money that is raised,” said Patty Owen, Stand Team Leader and Navy mom.

“Pound Challenge created an opportunity for everyday people like myself to get involved with an important cause,” said Dallas Robinson, US Olympian and National Guardsman. “The number of people who contributed really showed how many people out there care for this cause and this organization.”

Active Heroes Event Manager for the Pound Challenge, Jeremy Sneed, was elated to see the event bring so much awareness for veteran suicide.

“It was so amazing to see gyms supporting Active Heroes from all over the country, especially when our cause is such an under acknowledged topic,” he said.

“WE FILLED THE STUDIO BEYOND CAPACITY WITH OUR VOLUNTEERS AND SUPPORTERS, WHICH WAS SOMETHING WAVE3 HAD NEVER SEEN BEFORE WITH A TELETHON,” SNEED SAID.

The telethon-style event took place at WAVE3 studios in Louisville, KY and was so successful thanks to numerous volunteers and gym partners.

TAkINg A STAND TO CALL ATTENTION TO VETERAN SUICIDES

Active Heroes’ annual Stand At Attention Competition grew to 10 locations in 2015, including Raleigh NC, its main base, Harrisburg, PA, Minneapolis, MN, Kennesaw, GA, Winston-Salem, NC, Houston, TX, Corpus Christi, TX, Nashville, TN, Philadelphia, PA and Wilmington, NC. Each event location averaged 20,000 visitors.

During the Stand at Attention events, members from the Navy, Army, Air Force, Coast Guard and Marines compete to see who can stand at attention the longest. Participants start at 10 am and stand until the last person is standing or 8 pm, whichever comes first. Donations received by each branch help military families in need, in 2015 the Navy had the most donations.

“To come from out of state, not knowing a soul and join a family of military members of all branches and feel like it was a family reunion - I highly recommend folks to get involved with this event. It was a very memorable time, and we made lifelong friends for a wonderful cause,” said Sandy Burgess, a volunteer and mother of the Marine who stood in Raleigh.

The Stand At Attention Competition is held each year in memory of Navy Veteran Philip Bordeaux, who stood for Navy the first year of the competition. Bordeaux passed away in 2013 after a car accident on a highway near the Naples, Italy base support site.

After joining the Navy in 2009, Bordeaux, of Durham, NC, was assigned to Norfolk, VA, as a harbor security coxswain. He arrived in Naples in June 2012 and worked his way up from patrol officer to patrol supervisor. At the time of his death, Bordeaux was working on his watch commander qualification, a position normally filled by a first-class petty officer.

Bordeaux often volunteered during off-duty hours, working local events around Halloween and Christmas for Active Heroes. While in Norfolk in 2011, he was a co-founder of a fundraiser in which members of the four armed services stood at attention, at length, in a public place for donations.

Each year, fellow sailors in Naples and many more people across America perform the Stand at Attention Competition, in Bordeaux’s honor.

“I do the Stand At Attention event each year in the hopes that if I can prevent one more military family from dealing with the effects of their loved one's suicide, then this is worth more to me than the money that is raised,” said Patty Owen, Stand Team Leader and Navy mom.

“Pound Challenge created an opportunity for everyday people like myself to get involved with an important cause,” said Dallas Robinson, US Olympian and National Guardsman. “The number of people who contributed really showed how many people out there care for this cause and this organization.”

Active Heroes Event Manager for the Pound Challenge, Jeremy Sneed, was elated to see the event bring so much awareness for veteran suicide.

“It was so amazing to see gyms supporting Active Heroes from all over the country, especially when our cause is such an under acknowledged topic,” he said.

“WE FILLED THE STUDIO BEYOND CAPACITY WITH OUR VOLUNTEERS AND SUPPORTERS, WHICH WAS SOMETHING WAVE3 HAD NEVER SEEN BEFORE WITH A TELETHON,” SNEED SAID.

The telethon-style event took place at WAVE3 studios in Louisville, KY and was so successful thanks to numerous volunteers and gym partners.

TAkINg A STAND TO CALL ATTENTION TO VETERAN SUICIDES

Active Heroes’ annual Stand At Attention Competition grew to 10 locations in 2015, including Raleigh NC, its main base, Harrisburg, PA, Minneapolis, MN, Kennesaw, GA, Winston-Salem, NC, Houston, TX, Corpus Christi, TX, Nashville, TN, Philadelphia, PA and Wilmington, NC. Each event location averaged 20,000 visitors.

During the Stand at Attention events, members from the Navy, Army, Air Force, Coast Guard and Marines compete to see who can stand at attention the longest. Participants start at 10 am and stand until the last person is standing or 8 pm, whichever comes first. Donations received by each branch help military families in need, in 2015 the Navy had the most donations.

“To come from out of state, not knowing a soul and join a family of military members of all branches and feel like it was a family reunion - I highly recommend folks to get involved with this event. It was a very memorable time, and we made lifelong friends for a wonderful cause,” said Sandy Burgess, a volunteer and mother of the Marine who stood in Raleigh.

The Stand At Attention Competition is held each year in memory of Navy Veteran Philip Bordeaux, who stood for Navy the first year of the competition. Bordeaux passed away in 2013 after a car accident on a highway near the Naples, Italy base support site.

After joining the Navy in 2009, Bordeaux, of Durham, NC, was assigned to Norfolk, VA, as a harbor security coxswain. He arrived in Naples in June 2012 and worked his way up from patrol officer to patrol supervisor. At the time of his death, Bordeaux was working on his watch commander qualification, a position normally filled by a first-class petty officer.

Bordeaux often volunteered during off-duty hours, working local events around Halloween and Christmas for Active Heroes. While in Norfolk in 2011, he was a co-founder of a fundraiser in which members of the four armed services stood at attention, at length, in a public place for donations.

Each year, fellow sailors in Naples and many more people across America perform the Stand at Attention Competition, in Bordeaux’s honor.

“I do the Stand At Attention event each year in the hopes that if I can prevent one more military family from dealing with the effects of their loved one's suicide, then this is worth more to me than the money that is raised,” said Patty Owen, Stand Team Leader and Navy mom.

“Pound Challenge created an opportunity for everyday people like myself to get involved with an important cause,” said Dallas Robinson, US Olympian and National Guardsman. “The number of people who contributed really showed how many people out there care for this cause and this organization.”

Active Heroes Event Manager for the Pound Challenge, Jeremy Sneed, was elated to see the event bring so much awareness for veteran suicide.

“It was so amazing to see gyms supporting Active Heroes from all over the country, especially when our cause is such an under acknowledged topic,” he said.

“WE FILLED THE STUDIO BEYOND CAPACITY WITH OUR VOLUNTEERS AND SUPPORTERS, WHICH WAS SOMETHING WAVE3 HAD NEVER SEEN BEFORE WITH A TELETHON,” SNEED SAID.

The telethon-style event took place at WAVE3 studios in Louisville, KY and was so successful thanks to numerous volunteers and gym partners.
In March, Active Heroes formally opened its community center’s doors to military families and created a paradigm shift in the way that veterans interact, serve and socialize with one another. The Community Center focuses on the whole person and entire family by providing opportunities ranging from acupuncture and CrossFit to academic scholarships and training Kentucky Humane Society dogs.

“Behind every activity and event is a deeply rooted commitment to eliminate veteran suicide and assist those suffering from difficulties associated with PTSD,” said Courtney Lutz, Legal Aid Society. “We’re proud to not only to count Active Heroes as our friends but also direct partners.”

Located at 8701 Old Bardstown Road in Louisville, just south of I-265, the Community Center features a wide variety of free support, seminars and activities for military service members, veterans and military families, free seminars on education opportunities and financial planning, resiliency training to help reduce veteran suicide, connections for veterans to resources from the Legal Aid Society and Disabled American Veterans, a common area for guests to relax and interact, wifi and the Active Heroes Store.

Monthly activities available include CrossFit workouts, yoga, meditation classes, acupuncture treatments, family nights, music lessons, dog training/fostering, hiking events and scheduled camping dates for the retreat.

“The Community Center is a nice judgment-free place to go relax. It’s nice to go somewhere you can be yourself and meet others like you,” said Dan Roberts, SSG, USA (retired).

Active Heroes partnered with Sullivan University and the American College of Barbering to provide scholarships to veterans and military families. Sullivan University offers scholarships for 100 percent of tuition for an Associates Degree and 50 percent of tuition for a Bachelor’s Degree. Both scholarship opportunities are open to veterans and service members. In 2015, $75,000 scholarships to Sullivan University were given away to one reservist and one veteran.
Nearly 900 veterans and more than 1,500 military family members visited the Active Heroes’ Retreat Center in 2015. With the help of nearly 500 volunteers, including civilians, employees from local businesses, Junior ROTC groups, Bullitt East and Bullitt Central baseball, the first cabin was built and 25 additional volunteer projects were completed. These projects included building a pavilion and two pergolas, as well as two carved statues that honor the fallen.

The Active Heroes Retreat Center and Nature Park is designed to give veterans and their families a safe place where they can intermingle with the public and have “Healing Areas” to enjoy time alone. Located on 144 beautiful acres seated in between rolling hills and valleys with four dedicated flat sections, it is the first retreat in America that is streamlined for active duty military, veterans and military families.

“My time at the Active Heroes’s retreat reminded me that I’m not alone,” said Niki Lopez, Active Heroes volunteer. “The retreat has become my home away from home where I am reminded of my time in the service and the brother and sisterhood that made me who I am.”

During Active Heroes’ fourth year, we focused on how we can affect the lives of veterans and their families through our four programs. Each program expense is listed on our 2015 IRS Form 990, which is available on our Web site (activeheroes.org/financials). We set our goals for fundraising and administration expenses to be as low as possible while still being able to function efficiently to support hundreds of veteran families.

When completed, the Active Heroes Retreat Center and Nature Park will have amenities such as solar-powered cabins, campsites, healing gardens, climbing walls, hiking and biking trails, archery ranges, petting zoos, horses and a small artificial lake.
ORGANIZATION ACCOMPLISHMENTS 2015

Community Center (opened March 2015)
>>> 2 yoga classes – 36 participants
>>> Halloween Military Family Night – 35 participants
>>> Polar Express Military Family Night – 55 participants
>>> 12 veterans received free legal advice/assistance through Legal Aid Society cookout
>>> 5 Self Defense Classes – 40 participants
>>> 96 Military Family members received acupuncture treatments
>>> 100 free tickets to wrestling
>>> 1 military wedding given away (worth $7500)
>>> 2 scholarships (100% associate’s and 50% bachelor’s) given away to one reservist and one veteran
>>> Lopp – Program: scholarship $39,560
>>> Morgan – Program: scholarship $29,440
>>> 10 tickets for UofL Football Game
>>> 20 tickets for the COLTS NFL football game
>>> 10 tickets for the KY Oaks given away to military family members
>>> 16 Veterans got a free guitar and music lessons in partnership with SOAR
>>> 5 military families got free dog training in partnership with Kentucky Humane Society
>>> DAV met 10 times at the Community Center (40 members)
>>> CVMA met 9 times at the Community Center (33 members)
>>> 1 dog paired with military family for behavior training until the dog was ready for adoption through KHS (to be grown in 2016)
>>> 6 military family members received free massage/reiki treatments (program didn’t start until November 2015)
>>> 14 military family members received free tickets for the Louisville Ballet
>>> $300 in gift cards for military families who couldn’t afford Christmas

Active Challenges
>>> 68 Carry The Fallen Events – 2080 participants according to sign-ups
>>> 75 team leaders trained in suicide prevention
>>> 175 gyms participating in the WOD
>>> 50 gym owners trained in Suicide Prevention
>>> 1,300 WOD individual participants
>>> 10 Stand At Attention Competitions – awareness audience of 35,000
>>> 3 zumba master classes – 350 participants
>>> 28 million pounds lifted in Pound Challenge
>>> 200 in-studio participants in Pound Challenge
>>> 35 gyms participated in Pound Challenge – 703 participants
>>> 186 lives saved from this program

Retreat Center
>>> 868 veterans and 1,512 military family members visited the retreat center in 2015 – making a total more than 1,500 veterans utilizing the retreat center in the first two years
>>> Over 100 military families camped
>>> 1 cabin built
>>> 25 volunteer projects
>>> We completed over 12,000 volunteer hours in 2015 – made up of 450 civilians, several business employee resource groups, Junior ROTC groups, Bullitt East and Bullitt Center baseball and many countless others who participated
>>> 1 pavilion and 2 pergolas built
>>> 2 additional carved statues to honor the fallen
>>> Built of horse fence and horse run in shed for 2016 programs

Community Outreach
>>> 3 home repairs in Louisville, KY area
>>> 1 home repair in Indiana
>>> 1 home repair in Alabama
>>> 1 backyard fence installed in Florida
>>> 1 roof installed in Massachusetts
>>> 1 wheelchair ramp in Leitchfield, KY

“THANKS TO THE CARING PEOPLE AT ACTIVE HEROES, MY HUSBAND IS FINALLY GETTING THE HELP WITH SOME ISSUES WE’VE BEEN TRYING TO DEAL WITH ALONE FOR ALMOST 5 YEARS. THANKS AGAIN!!”
- Joni Caseltine Gajewski
ACTIVE HEROES FINISHES THREE HOMES FOR MILITARY FAMILIES

In 2015, Active Heroes and WAVE 3 News teamed up with companies all over the community on Operation Room Retreat, which gives military families a refuge and a place to retreat when they’re not serving our country.

Three families, the Goodlins, the Austins and the Manharts, had areas of their homes that needed some sprucing up. UAW, Home Depot, Winner Furniture and others were ready to help.

Brian Austin and Megan Leitsinger have been through some ups and downs.

“Especially with PTSD,” Austin Leitsinger said. “It kind of shuts you down.”

Their new living room is now a bright spot.

“It’s been so long since it’s felt like anything good has happened to us other than being together, and now we have a real house,” said Leitsinger.

Todd Dunn from the UAW is a military veteran.

“Knowing that you’ve got community behind you while you’re gone and even when you come home, it’s just another testament of what it means to serve your country and then have your country behind you,” he said.

The Manharts felt that love of outdoors with their daughters and granddaughter in their new backyard.

“(It was) very dull, not relaxing, uninviting, and uneventful for the family to sit out here and enjoy, and now it’s just beautiful,” Dorie Manhart said.

The makeover included a new deck, landscaping, fire pit, play set and new memories. They’re making up the 10 years, 10 months and 10 days that Christopher Manhart missed while in the Navy.

The Austin family’s surprise — plans for a basement redo — had to happen earlier than expected because dad Neil was shipped out to Texas for training causing him to miss the big reveal of his new man cave.

His daughter Ava brought her daddy doll to check it out until the whole family can be together again.

“We’re all over the moon,” said Amanda, Neil’s wife. “We can’t believe it. It’s just a huge help, a blessing, (and) it’s just amazing.”

WAVE 3 viewers wrote nomination letters in May explaining why the families deserved a room makeover. Originally just one winner was to be selected, but after seeing these three great families, it was hard to narrow it down to just one.

“ACTIVE HEROES YOU’VE ALREADY DONE SO MUCH FOR ME SO THANK YOU FOR BEING THERE AND GIVING ME A PLATFORM TO SUPPORT. I’VE EXPERIENCED MANY CHALLENGES SINCE SEPARATION FROM THE MILITARY AND EVENTUALLY WAS ABLE TO FIND THE HELP I REALLY NEEDED. I’VE NEEDED A WAY TO GIVE BACK AND HELP OTHERS IN SIMILAR SITUATIONS BUT COULDN’T FIND A WAY. ACTIVE HEROES HAS GIVEN ME THAT VOICE; SO SERIOUSLY THANK YOU!”

- Jeremiah Cays Cooke-Gritton
On the morning of Oct. 4, 2015, Active Heroes said goodbye to long-time friend and board of advisor member, Justin Fitch. Justin fought stage 4 colon cancer for years, inspiring a nation of veterans, military families and supporters to never give up on his “Final Mission” of building the Active Heroes Retreat Center.

Born June 26, 1982, Justin was raised in Hayward, WI and graduated from Michigan Tech with a Bachelor’s of Science in Business Administration. He served as an officer in the United States Army and deployed to the Forward Operating Base McHenry in Iraq. Years later, Justin was diagnosed with metastatic colon cancer, yet he continued to spread the message of “Never Giving Up” while supporting Active Heroes.

Justin medically retired from the military Jan. 29, 2015 having attained the rank of Major. He continued his cancer treatment in Pleasant Prairie, WI. Despite deteriorating health conditions, he fought to live his life to the fullest and enjoy his retirement while dedicating what time he could to Active Heroes.

One of the founding committee members of the ruck march movement for veteran suicide awareness, Justin was instrumental in the growth of the Carry The Fallen ruck marches. He and an Iraqi Freedom veteran Troy Yocum shared a vision of the Active Heroes Retreat Center.

Justin’s message continued to spread across America with the support of the American Heroes Channel, Raycom Media and Chive Charities. In just a few short days, Justin’s Final Mission campaign raised more than $300,000 for the first cabins at the Active Heroes Retreat Center.

To donate in memory of Justin Fitch, go to www.FinalMission.org

Check our Active Heroes' Podcasts: vimeo.com/150139022

Justin’s “Final Mission” to build the Active Heroes Retreat Center will continue with the help of thousands of supporters, events and teams of volunteers who will never quit until the Active Heroes Retreat Center is finished.
Active Heroes has helped thousands of active duty military, veterans and their families with financial support, home repairs and programs to combat PTSD and veteran suicide with donations from people like you! To make a donation, please contact our office at 502.277.9280 or visit ActiveHeroes.org.