

Applegate woman starts nonprofit retreat for wounded veterans

BY A. PARADISO

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have been going on for more than ten years. Over two million Americans have served overseas. Whatever you may think about the politics, one thing is undoubtedly true—many Americans who have done what they considered their duty serving their country have come home emotionally and physically wounded.

Julie Fossen Wheeler grew up near McKee Bridge. Her family also purchased property in the Wallowa Mountains near Joseph, Oregon, when she was a teen. Her father used the 40 acres and five cabins, known as Divide Camp, as a base for elk hunting and summer pack trips.

After her father's death the camp didn't see much use. Her mother considered selling it, but the place it held in her memories made that an undesirable option. When Julie shared her vision of hosting wounded warriors her mother agreed that would be a wonderful use for the camp.

Newly retired, Julie created Divide Camp, Inc., a nonprofit gearing up to provide cost-free wilderness adventures primarily to post-9/11 wounded veterans. There are many such facilities in the south, but few in the northwest.

"I believe we owe those who fight for us," Julie says. "Even if you don't support war, we should all support our troops."

Applegate rancher and welder Carl Offenbacher, who has been working in Afghanistan, and longtime Divide Camp elk hunter Phil Moyer came on board as directors. Local guides in Wallowa County will lead hunting and fishing trips. Hiking, cross-country skiing, trail riding, snowmobiling and equine therapy are among the future goals.

Few people realize that many discouraged vets attempt suicide after returning home. The Veterans Administration estimates that a veteran dies by suicide every 80 minutes. Divide Camp is conceived as a therapeutic setting

to help wounded vets find spiritual and emotional well-being.

Aware that not everyone supports hunting, the board nonetheless feels that, particularly for those who grew up in rural cultures where hunting and fishing were the norm, being able to return to such pastimes can play an important role in the healing process.

"Finding a new 'normal' is critical," Julie says, "especially for those with new prosthetic limbs. Being outdoors and with other vets aids in recovery."

The Wallows have been referred to as "America's Switzerland." There are 70 lakes tucked in among the remote mountains, and numerous unique flora and fauna including 80 different wildflowers. It is also known for its elk hunting.

Last year Julie spent six months at the camp, with occasional help, cleaning out and refurbishing. She installed new floors and chinked the exterior logs in two cabins, redeveloped the spring complete with solar pump and installed water and power lines. Julie plans to spend another six months this year completing everything necessary to update the camp. She will be joined by Carl and Phil, and other volunteers during

the summer for differing periods of time. She hopes her mother will spend part of the summer enjoying the camp for the first time in years.

Still needed are more chinking, fencing, plumbing, wiring and help completing the photovoltaic electric system. The goal is to retain the rustic camp flavor, but also provide insulated cabins, semi-modern plumbing and electric lights.

Julie is using her own resources and will look for sponsorship and contributions from businesses and foundations. She has decided not to seek federal grant money "with all their strings attached."

Tax-deductible donations are appreciated. Help with public relations and physical labor is needed. Anyone interested in a working vacation in the Wallowa Mountains should contact Julie at 541-531-9939 for details. Go to www.dividecamp.org for more information.

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