


Salute

Feb/Mar 2015

The magazine for America's military



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VETERANS



Kevin, a wounded warrior, and his father outside Walter Reed.

The Fight Never Ends

Walter Reed's Operation Ward 57 supports injured and ill service members, veterans and caregivers

By DONNA BOYLE SCHWARTZ

An innovative support and comfort program has been helping many of the nation's most severely wounded service members and their families since 2007: Operation Ward 57.

Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., was the first stop for many of America's returning wounded service members from Iraq and Afghanistan, and the facility's orthopedic Ward 57 was known as "the amputee ward," housing many severely injured patients for weeks or even months. A nurse on the ward, Scott Cameron, cofounded

Operation Ward 57 as a way for individuals and companies to show their support and raise funds for wounded men and women. That mission has continued and expanded since Walter Reed combined with the Naval Hospital in Bethesda to form the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center.

"Our mission is to support wounded, injured and ill service members, veterans, their caregivers and those that aid in their recovery by providing assistance and outreach in their recovery, comfort and morale, and through advocacy, education and promotion of their circumstances," stated Opera-

tion Ward 57 executive director Brittney Hamilton. "We started providing comfort items while service members recover at the hospital, and to date more than 8,000 T-shirts, blankets, beanies and other comfort and hygiene items have been distributed to wounded service members and their families."

The nonprofit group also provides financial assistance. "All too often we meet families in which the transition from active duty to civilian life leaves them with months or years of no benefits," Hamilton explained. "Bills get behind, cars break down, and a simple task of keeping food on the table becomes a struggle. In 2013 alone we provided nearly \$18,000 in cash grants to 37 individuals in order to keep food on the table, pay rent, pay utilities and repair vehicles. In addition, we help hundreds of service members each year through mentorship and case management in our Honor & Courage program."

Some of the highest profile events run by Operation Ward 57 include the Annual Wounded Hero 5K, and the Rock & Rally For the Troops. "In just two years the 5K raised over \$50,000, and in four years Rock & Rally has raised close to \$45,000," Hamilton noted. "These events are not only about fundraising, but about bringing the community together in a show of support of our nation's heroes and to raise awareness of veteran-related issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder, suicide, disability and traumatic brain injury."

Thousands of service members and their families all over the United States have attended once-in-a-lifetime events through Operation Ward 57—in 2013, the organization provided more than \$18,000 in concert and event tickets, race registrations, caregiver "days out" and unique morale-boosting events. In addition, various artists and performers donated \$4,000 worth of tickets so that service members and families could enjoy a unique experience by attending a show and meeting the artist.

Former Army Spc. Jeffrey Shonk, who was wounded during a multiple murder by a fellow serviceman while serving in Iraq, said the Opera-



Operation Ward 57's Brittney Hamilton with wounded warrior Jeffrey Shonk prior to the Army 10-Miler.

tion Ward 57 program has done wonders for his morale. "After losing my roommates and being shot in the head and legs, I have a very hard time trusting people," he noted. "Any time of the day or night, the Ward 57 volunteers are there, someone you can talk to and trust. You can share things with them that you don't necessarily want to share with your family or friends. It shows veterans that there are people who care, and that makes a huge difference."

Shonk said he received the VIP treatment at rock shows, meeting various artists—including Rob Zombie and Five Finger Death Punch—and receiving an autographed Schecter guitar. "It is just so amazing to be able to meet some of these artists and sit down and have a beer with them," he recalled. "It made me want to get involved and help other guys like me, so I rode a bike in the Ward 57 Army 10-Miler. It is just a great organization that helps when veterans and their families need it the most."

Hamilton pointed out that Operation Ward 57 continues to assist service members and their families for as long as they need. "Our motto is 'For the wounded, the fight never ends,'" she said. "We believe that despite 'healing' and leaving the hospital or transition units, these service members face lifelong challenges, and we want to continue to be by their side for the rest of their lives. We want them to know they are not forgotten and can receive help and support no matter what type of injury or illness."

