

2016

Rose Beyond the Thorns Caregiver RETREAT May 27-29, 2016

On May 27-29 SemperMax Support Fund hosted a Caregiver Retreat at Kingsmill Resort in Williamsburg, VA. Slots for May's Caregiver Retreat were opened strictly to the surge of caregivers who had applied in October and whom were wait-listed to accommodate our small impact model of care. Applicants were again asked to consider the number of retreats they may have been on with other organizations to allow those who had not been on retreats before an opportunity to attend this one. Several Caregivers responded they had been on other retreats and would hold off reapplying so others could take a slot.



11 Caregivers were selected and one slot was held for a caregiver whose husband is still in the acute phase of recovery at the Hunter McGuire VA in Richmond. Participants this time were all Army spouses, except one who was a fiancé. Participants hailed from Washington State, Michigan, Florida, Massachusetts, Texas, and South Carolina. Flights were graciously provided by Hero Miles, to whom we are immensely grateful!

Unfortunately, the spouse from Seattle had to cancel the morning of departure due to a medical issue. A slot in September's retreat will be opened

to her.

When the ladies arrived at Kingsmill Resort, a baseline of where they were emotionally was taken by anonymous survey, looking at key touch points that were taken from their applications. Rated with a scale from 0-5 (3-5 being the higher degrees of identification with a particular statement); 70% indicated that they felt they had lost their sense of identity, 90% did not make time for self care a priority; and the majority felt they needed to improve their spiritual and emotional balance (80%), relationships with their spouses (90%), and sexual health and intimacy (80%). These were areas of concentration during the retreat; however, much time was given to

listening to the caregivers and helping them to open up and realize they deserved and could ask for help. Overall, this group was perceived by the workshop hosts as being in a state of numbness, dealing with an abundance of collateral issues beyond what is expected of a recovering family.

Interactive retreat workshops were led by Bonnie Owens, LCSW-R, CASAC, ICADC, EMDR 2 and Tina Atherall, LMSW from NY and Ihsan Rogers, LCSW-C, from Bethesda, MD, (see bios to follow) with interjected caregiver perspective thoughts, experiences of relevance, and lessons learned provided by Shannon Maxwell. Approximately 12 hours of workshops were offered over the course of the weekend. The following topics were covered: The neurobiology of trauma, TBI, and CRS; Understanding Grief; Renewing Your Identity; Sexual Health Intimacy and Communication; and Taking Care of Me. Based on a post-retreat survey answered by 8 of the 10 caregivers, these targeted workshops were considered on point and helpful in strengthening caregiver resiliency and the workshop leads' ability to provide and communicate beneficial information were acknowledged and appreciated by 100% of the participants. One note-while the Sexual Health and Intimacy workshop was viewed as helpful by 85% of the participants, it was noted that the focus of the discussion seemed to be on active duty members at earlier stages of recovery rather than this population of veterans in later stages of recovery, and therefore made it harder to relate.

The remainder of the retreat was allotted for meals, free time, and respite at the spa. In addition, Bonnie and Tina took interested participants out on the James River for kayak and paddle board therapy and taught the women Brain Body Centered relaxation techniques and meditation techniques.

The retreat is deemed a success with 87.5% of participants indicating in their post-retreat survey that they attained real tools that will allow them to regain a sense of identity and strengthen/improve their emotional and spiritual balance, relationships with their spouses and others, sexual health and intimacy. 100% left the retreat with an understanding of the neurobiological affects of trauma and how it may be affecting their life and relationships. Further 87.5% of the participants reported they felt hopeful, not alone, more connected, and likely to make self care a priority in the future.

Favorite topics of the groups were expressed to be: Self Care, Grief, CRS/TBI, and the Lantern exercise. The group reported the following to be most helpful from the retreat: "knowing there's help and it's okay to ask for it;" "understanding that it's okay to feel;" "finding out that I'm not alone;" "it's not selfish to care for oneself, and it's okay to take time for ME;" "validation;" "connecting with others, talking, openness;" and "five finger" yoga.

Suggestions for future retreats were ending sessions at 9pm each night, additional downtime, and accommodations in one building to promote connecting as a whole.

