

HOMEWARD FOR HEROES OFFERS FREE OUTDOOR TREKS TO VETS AND FIRST RESPONDERS

KALISPELL, MONTANA—Kalispell-based Homeward for Heroes grew out of camping trips—where Dan Reese, a retired 20-year veteran of the U.S. Army National Guard and Marines, would open up about his military experiences to wife Laura. “We’d go camping. He found it helpful to just talk,” Laura explains.

During Dan’s service in Afghanistan, he saw many soldiers experience PTSD and some succumb to suicide. The couple founded Homeward for Heroes to help veterans talk through their struggles, among like-minded people and away from everyday distractions. “Our motto has always been ‘Disconnect to Reconnect,’” Laura says.

The organization serves approximately 300 people each year through its annual wilderness treks for veterans and first responders, and nearly 1,000 through other gatherings such as monthly meetups around a firepit, weekend campouts, and buddy checks. Their signature Old West Trek, July 14-22, spans 1,100 miles across Montana, visiting ghost towns and historical sites. The trek is navigated by four-wheel drive vehicles, and much is on Forest Service roads.

“We provide a PTSD course during the 10-day trek,” Dan says. “We want people to connect with nature and each other. We find what triggers people and then work out the triggers.”

Wayne Appl, fundraising and outreach coordinator at A Ray of Hope, sits on the Board of Directors for Homeward for Heroes, helps organize and lead the treks, and facilitates evening talk circles. “When people undergo trauma, it affects them, their families, their work,” Appl says. “You can train your body and you can also train your mind. We give people the tools to help them train their minds and to get them to a better place. It becomes a habit over time.”

The treks are free to participants and include fuel, activities, permits, fees, and nightly dinners. Financial support is provided by the Gianforte Family Foundation, Town Pump Charitable Foundation, the Kalispell and Whitefish VFWs, and individual donors.

Since its founding in 2015, Homeward For Heroes has expanded to include treks in Montana, Idaho, Oregon, and Arizona; chapters operate in Montana and Arizona. “We have requests from all over the U.S.,” Dan says. “We get a lot of calls, some at three in the morning, from people in hard places,” Laura adds. “Last year, we learned of 13 potential veteran suicides that we were able to flip around.”

“People are kind of shy at the opening meet-and-greet, but groups bond together after a 10-day trek,” she continues. “They open up. We’re building a family of veterans and first responders.”

Homeward for Heroes is one of just 15 organizations across the world to receive a 2023 Bluetti Heroes award, which will provide solar equipment to power showers for the off-grid treks and run necessary equipment in the field. Bluetti is also filming a short documentary showcasing the group’s work June 9-11, outside of Kalispell.

For more information on becoming involved, or to support the organization, contact Dan Reese at 406-471-0513 or Homeward4heroes@gmail.com.

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