



Hunting camp gives veterans place to cope

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By **Christine Byers** *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

FARMINGTON, Mo. — Surrounded by the quiet solitude of nature, William "Mike" White allowed six months of grief to flow.

It was November 2006. He was sitting in a tree stand in the woods of Lewiston, Mo., hunting for the first time without his son, Marine Pfc. Christopher N. White, 23.

His tears flowed that day for his son, who was killed June 20, 2006, by a roadside bomb in Iraq. And also for the soldier left paralyzed by the same blast.

As White let his emotions go, an idea came in.

His son was never coming home, but White decided to do something for those who would.

He returned home to North Carolina and focused on finding a farm in his native Missouri where injured soldiers could hunt.

He found it in Farmington.

"I was thinking about the boy that lived, and how his quality of life is gone," White said. "I put myself in that situation and thought these guys that are hurt out there like that should be able to get out and do this."

Last month, White, a native of Jefferson County, hosted his third group of veterans during deer season at the 140-acre site, which includes a three-bedroom house.

They didn't kill anything. But White has learned that's not what's important. "Sitting around the fire or in the house talking does more for them than shooting something," he said.

He named the property "Chris Neal Farm," after his son. He created a nonprofit foundation - naming it Camp Hope, after a military outpost in Iraq - to raise money and pay for all of the soldiers' expenses.

More than a place for injured soldiers to hunt, the property has become a camp for healing.

"I just wanted to have a place where they could get out and enjoy the outdoors and see if they can do what they used to do," White said. "Turns out, it's got a lot more than that. I never dreamed it would have the effect that it does."

White asks soldiers to bring a caretaker along to help them feel more comfortable and with any special needs. Some bring relatives. Others, just friends.

Jason Lawrence of Marionville, Mo., who lost some of his hearing while serving in Iraq and now walks with a cane to support his injured knees, brought his cousin along for the experience last month. They stayed five days.

"I hope you had fun while you were here," White said, as he walked with Lawrence and his cousin to their car.

"We had a blast," Lawrence, 42, said as he hugged White. "Honestly, it's the first time I've laughed in a long time."

Signs along the gravel road leading to the farmhouse greet soldiers with words such as, "Camp Hope: Our thank you for serving," and, "Through these gates will pass the heroes of our freedom."

Logs cover the facade of the three-bedroom modular house. A sign on the back porch reads, "Come as strangers, leave as friends."

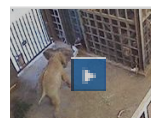
White's friends, including Jerry Wells of Bonne Terre, Mo., helped renovate and furnish the house where the soldiers stay.

Wells and White's brother, Steve White of Springfield, Mo., are sometimes called "mess sergeants" because they cook and clean around the house. They, along with White, stay in a trailer nearby.

"There really is some kind of magic out here," said Wells, who maintains the property during the off-season.

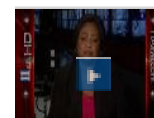
Inside, a hand-drawn version of Christopher White's military portrait hangs above the TV in the living room.

Featured video



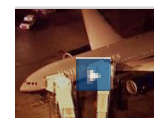
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Pictures of two groups who have visited Camp Hope, and of White's son and two other Marines killed with him, line the shelves of another wall. White calls it "the Wall of Honor."

The last deer White's son shot is mounted above the couch.

Joel Alexander and Chris Amacker of Cape Girardeau, Mo., did a lot of resting and reflecting on that couch last month.

Both served in Iraq and now suffer from brain injuries and post-traumatic stress disorder. And both moved slowly on their fifth day at the farm. Amacker, 33, groaned as he hoisted his hunting gear over his head and over his back brace, which is decorated with a patch of the American flag.

"I climbed a ridge yesterday, and it hurt," Amacker said. "But it felt good because I haven't done nothing like that in years."

He didn't think he could do it.

"It's nothing a pharmacist can't fix," his friend, Rob Sales, quipped.

"I own the pharmacy, I think," Alexander added.

Alexander, 32, said he, too, was amazed at what he accomplished at the farm, including wandering in the woods alone. At home, paranoia overwhelms him when he walks outside.

"It sounds funny to say that a big guy like me gets scared, but I do when I get out of my comfort zone," he said. "And this was definitely out of my comfort zone."

"Amen," said Amacker, who hadn't ventured out of his house much for the past two years.

Alexander said watching Amacker pushed him to do more.

"It's kind of like a competition," Alexander said. "You don't want to be the low man on the totem pole."

White has seen personal triumphs like theirs before. During turkey season, a legally blind soldier drove an all-purpose vehicle while another soldier shouted "left" and "right." An amputee with a prosthetic leg climbed into a tree stand.

Though the accomplishments have been plentiful at Camp Hope, so have the tears.

Conversations around the campfire have stretched well into the night. Topics have wandered from small talk to recollections of war that only those who have been there could tell.

Vietnam veteran Bob Tomlinson of Bonne Terre, who volunteered for chores around the farm during last month's outing, found himself talking with younger veterans about his war experiences.

"You have no idea what this has meant to me, Mike," Tomlinson said, after White thanked him for his help. "Where was something like this 35 years ago when we were coming home?"

"These guys poured their guts out this weekend," he added. "And so many go through life without saying a word."

White knows of the need for this type of therapy. Veterans tell him the experience does more for them in one week than years of sessions with psychologists. "Mother nature heals," he said.

For now, he relies on donations to cover the travel and meal expenses of soldiers and their companions. Donations come from individuals and veterans organizations, and friends and volunteers also help organize fundraisers.

"After how long of getting pushed around, it's nice to know people are helping out the vets," Amacker said. "This man turned his son's death into something more than just a death."

But White's mission in memory of his son is far from over.

He wants to build a lodge that will accommodate every injured soldier's needs - especially those of the soldier who was wounded in the blast that killed his son. And he hopes to have it open year-round - instead of just the weeks set aside for deer and turkey hunting each year.

White, 48, uses all of his vacation time from his job as an equipment inspector for the military to visit the farm and attend fundraisers. He plans to retire near the property.

"I feel like part of me is here," he said. "When it gets closer to deer season, it's a lonely time. It helps them, and I suppose it helps me, too. I love to see them leave with a smile on their face and hope in their heart."

Moments later, he smiled and waved to Amacker, who had just climbed into a tree stand.

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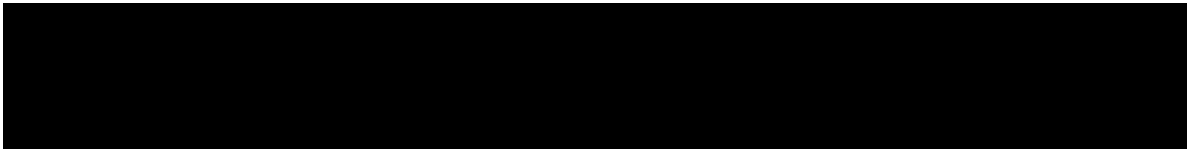
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