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Cause in the News

Cause: Comfort for America's Uniformed Services

By Hartmut Lau '67

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Most people would probably describe Walter Reed as a place where doctors and nurses diligently care for wounded soldiers, therapists patiently coax a response from injured limbs, staffers struggle with the inevitable Army paperwork, and chaplains offer words of encouragement. All in all, it's a pretty somber place.

But every now and then Walter Reed becomes something completely different. At Mologne House, the main outpatient facility, flashing lights substitute for chandeliers and whoops and cheers drown out any semblance of a hushed hospital atmosphere. Even old Armor files like me, who left most of their hearing at Grafenwoehr, can hear soldiers hooting and hollering as they try to "kill" each other.

Trying to "kill" each other? Sounds of gunfire and grenade explosions reverberate throughout the room—but these sounds come from high-tech speakers, flat screen TVs, and Xbox 360s—as West Point grads preside over the virtual mayhem they've worked so hard to create: a 40-man double elimination videogame tournament for wounded OIF/OEF outpatients. Of course, you're back in the game a second or so after you've been "killed"—and you need to because players with the most "kills" move on to greater glory and a chance to win prizes, while the lesser marksmen migrate to the loser's bracket. Two losses and you're out!

Tournament prizes are good—laptop computers, iPods, portable DVD players—but perhaps the best prize is simply taking a few hours away from stress and worry; time to be young, have fun, and forget, if only for a little while, that you haven't yet learned to walk on your new legs and don't yet know if they can save your eye.

Since hostilities began in Iraq and Afghanistan, thousands of wounded service members have returned to fill America's military hospitals. Many of these young men and women suffer life-altering injuries—traumatic brain injury, burns, shrapnel wounds, loss of limbs, loss of sight, and other injuries—that require numerous medical procedures and lengthy hospital stays far from home and family. Overcoming the pain, dealing with rehabilitation, and adjusting to a life of changed circumstances is often a long and lonely struggle. Medical care alone is not enough. They need activities, social interaction, mental stimulation, recreation, and the appreciation for their sacrifice from a grateful nation to aid their physical and emotional recovery.

That's where organizations like CAUSE (Comfort for America's Uniformed Services) come in. A nonprofit organization founded in 2003 by Class of '67 alumni and their wives, CAUSE helps outpatients fill the long days and empty hours between therapies and medical procedures with programs that encourage soldiers to leave the isolation of their rooms and connect with one another and with volunteers from the wider community.

Videogame tournaments are now a monthly event at Walter Reed. There are also Sunday brunches that evoke memories of home and lazy weekends and spa days to give soldiers and family members a taste of pure indulgence as professional stylists, manicurists and massage therapists work their magic. Yes, even the burliest soldiers line up for massages and manicures. Summer picnics, gift packs, and a digital lending library all help provide a respite from the many stark issues these soldiers face.

CAUSE has greatly benefited from its affiliation with the Long Gray Line, but folks all across the country are also pitching in to help:

- A self-professed “aging rock ‘n roller” from Minnesota funds several dozen iPods to be raffled off to wounded soldiers.
- The “Bookish Babes,” a Nebraska book club, hosts Coffees for CAUSE to raise money for the digital library.
- A Massachusetts police department conducts a fund drive, and officers drive to DC to make the donation in person.
- A Texas Marine just back from Iraq asks his wedding guests to make a donation to CAUSE in lieu of gifts.
- Quilters in North Carolina, Minnesota, and Maryland donate hand-made lap quilts.
- Students in the District of Columbia, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Virginia, Massachusetts, Florida, and as far away as Guam collect items for gift packs.
- Friends in Washington, DC; Texas; and North Carolina form Operation Recuperation and donate dozens of DVDs and videogames every month.
- The family of Pennsylvania soldier killed in Iraq asks for donations to CAUSE in lieu of flowers.

The Long Gray Line is the core of CAUSE, with dozens of grads making donations and volunteering their time and talents. And it’s not just my generation that is getting involved, although serving in Viet Nam and having more than a few Purple Hearts among us definitely gives us a special appreciation for what today’s young soldiers face.

So, I’m going to hustle back to the registration desk where Dan Downs ’03, at Walter Reed for the past ten months, and his mother Jan are tackling the mathematical intricacies of tournament brackets (who knew that yearling math someday would help me run a videogame tournament). I often wish we could do more for these young men and women, but right now maybe getting them assigned to the right tournament heat is enough. “Hey! Nice kill.”

CAUSE was founded by Joyce & Beach Doheny ’67; Vivian & Paul Haseman ’67; Barbara & Hartmut Lau ’67; and Debbie Wenner & Dick Waterman ’67.

Board members are: John Caldwell ’67, President; Barbara Lau, Executive Director; Denise Liebowitz, Secretary; Joyce Doheny; Jack London, USNA ’59; Ron Naples ’67; and D.J. Skelton ’03.

For more information, visit www.cause-usa.org or e-mail info@cause-usa.org.

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