Home is where these Marines' hearts are



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Above, Returning Warriors enjoy some time Tuesday on Lake Keowee. Below, Returning Warrior Sid Eargle, left, enjoys some inter-family pool time as he and his wife, Kimberly, and son, Dylan, join Sid's host family, Suzette and Hayes Cross, during the 'Honoring Their Service' getaway at Keowee Key this week.

BY JESSICA SIBLEY
THE JOURNAL

SALEM — It has all the makings of a home sweet home.

Fully equipped with caregivers, smiling loved ones, colorful flowers leading up the walkway, dinner simmering on the stove, a warm and welcoming bed with a folded down corner that quietly says, 'Take a load off, enjoy your stay."

It's no hotel or bed and breakfast.

Instead, for the fourth year, various families at Keowee Key offered their homes to the Returning Warriors as they visit for three nights of rest and relaxation.

For Warrior Sid Eargle, he is staying with hosts Suzette and Hayes Cross. And for Eargle, the term Returning Warrior has an extra special meaning.

"I got to stay with them last year, too," Eargle explained. "I had so much fun with them. They made me feel so comfortable and welcomed. It's amazing that you can spend just a few days with a family and leave feeling that you've gained them as your own family members."



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An entire community has extended its own warm welcome as the Marines spent Tuesday enjoying the lake and then were honored that evening with a 'Veterans Appreciation Night' at Gignilliat Field, complete with dinner, a concert and fireworks. The Marines will wrap up their visit today and Thursday.

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For the Cross duo, last year was their first time opening their home to the warriors and they plan do it for as long as the program continues.

"We don't have any direct contact with people in the military," Suzette said. "This was a way to gain some insight into what they go through. The sacrifices they make. It's amazing and something a lot of people just have no real idea about. I know we didn't."

To the unknowing eye, the Eargle and Cross crews seem like one solid, family unit.

"It was so great because after last year, they invited my wife and son to their place," Eargle said. "They treated us like we were their own family. They made us feel really special."

For first time hosts, Jo Ann and Bob Hill, the Marines' visit is turning into a "fantastic experience."

"Our Marine, Eric, is about as wide open as they come and it's been so fun," Jo Ann said. "He is so engaging, but said many times that he just can't believe how this community has opened their hearts and homes to them. That he can't fully express what it means to him. I'm sure it brings more joy to us, having them here, but I hope we give that to them, too.

"We're always reading about war, but it doesn't seem real," she added. "Well, it gets very real, very fast, when you're embracing these young men in your own home."

Bob Hill, who was a National Guardsman, said programs such as these are so important because those who have served before can share empathy for these young soldiers.

"I hope other communities can have the fortitude to get through the many steps it takes to turn this event into a community-wide reality," Bob added. "There is a lot behind-the-scenes work that goes into this each year."

Perhaps what stood out the most to host Hayes Cross was the fact that when a Marine decides to open up and share some of his experiences, he speaks so "matter-of-factly" about what he does.

"Yes, it's their job," Hayes said. "That's how they look at it. They are right about that, but there is still a huge human element to the work and to them. They're doing their job, but they're doing it on our behalf. We are happy to show our thanks to Sid and to all the service members."

According to host and co-organizer Allen Funk, he and many other host families continue to stay in contact with Marines who have stayed at Keowee Key over the last three years.

"They want to reject our gestures," Funk said. "Because they see it as a job. They don't see it as anything that they should be praised for. But, even though they want to fight it, we have to look them in the eye and say, 'Let us. We want to do this for you. Just, let us and let it just wash all over you. Enjoy every second.'"

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