



WHERE MILITARY FAMILIES RECONNECT

My Civilian-Run Nonprofit is better than Your Veteran-Run Nonprofit, and here is WHY...

by Heather Ehle, Founder and CEO

Because my civilian-run nonprofit is run by Veterans. What? And we all get along. Really? Now let's sing *Kumbaya* and hold hands while we address the veteran suicide and unemployment rates.

We are all at a crossroads. A record number of service members are coming home as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are coming to a close. Add to those numbers the service members that are retiring and reductions in forces as troop levels are being reduced to pre-WWII levels. Unfortunately, suicide rates for Veterans remain at a shocking 22 a day. The military community alone cannot and should not bear the brunt of healing Our Military Families.

This is all of our concern, and all of us should be working together for solutions.

Project Sanctuary is innovative and different. We take great pride in doing things our way. One of our



common phrases is "Shut up and Listen." We simply ask our families, "How can we help?" And then we provide. I think this philosophy and way of leading a nonprofit was necessitated by the fact that I am a civilian (gasp!!). I didn't know any better, so I mixed civilians and veterans together to create our core staff, volunteer base and one-of-a-kind program. And it works. 40+ retreats later, 90% of our families are married, and we proudly, yet humbly, boast about our 0 suicides. (We are counting spouses and teens, too!)

Project Sanctuary may be run by a civilian CEO, but it is "owned" by Our Military Families. Once they have completed our

six-day therapeutic retreat, they are invited to provide feedback, thoughts and inspiration in general. Our graduate families are the ones that set our course, recommend our agenda and remind us what is really important. They give us perspective on how we might be able to better serve.

Project Sanctuary is staffed by civilians AND veterans, working side by side, marching forward and creating a dynamic and ever changing program. As our service members transition into their communities, they will need a bridge of support from veterans and civilians alike. I hear all too often "1% served" and "civilians will never truly understand." Maybe civilians will never understand the horrors of war, but we do have the capacity to learn and to care. It is going to take all of us, working together, to create the community, the jobs, and the future that our military families deserve.

To our service members, veterans and families that continue to serve, thank you! And thank you to the civilians that see the need and have stepped up. Now is our time to begin to serve.

P.O. Box 1563 • Granby, CO 80446 • Phone: 720-561-9193 • Email: info@projectsanctuary.us

www.ProjectSanctuary.us

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