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One Family's Story About the Impact of Veterans Family Camp

Madison, WI – “You signed on the same dotted line we all did.” This is one of the most impactful statements Marine Corps veteran, Sergeant Don MacLeod, has ever heard during the nine years he’s attended Veterans Family Camp, a free weekend retreat for veterans held twice a year at Easterseals Wisconsin Camps in Wisconsin Dells.

The man was walking with a cane and Don could tell he’d endured significant injuries during his time serving in the military. Don enlisted in 1986, served during Desert Storm, and was later honorably discharged in 1992. He never felt he could hold a candle to those who would share at the roundtable discussions about their experiences in the service. Most of the veterans he has met at camp suffer from PTSD. Don was never in a war zone, had never fired a shot during combat, and had always felt he wasn’t quite the hero the others were.

The man with the cane said to him, “Look...you signed the same dotted line we all did. Just because you didn’t go into combat doesn’t mean your service meant any less.”

Don was honored by the heartfelt words his fellow comrade shared with him that day. He realized that if that remark would have been made by a civilian, the impact would not have been the same. He would have probably just shrugged it off and moved on. But this was different. He said he knew then that this camp was something special.



The MacLeod family represented Veterans Family Camp at Easterseals Wisconsin’s Annual Campaign kickoff in March. Far right, Cyndi Hemmer, Easterseals Wisconsin Camps AmeriCorps Veterans Camp Coordinator.

Since the program’s inception in 2009, the camp has served nearly 1,500 veterans and family members. The camp sessions are designed to give families time to reconnect with each other and network with other veterans during a fun, relaxing weekend with a variety of planned and optional activities.

The biannual Veterans Family Camp relies on donations from the community. Easterseals Wisconsin’s partnership with AmeriCorps makes possible the Veterans Coordinator position. In this role, the AmeriCorps member serves as the community outreach liaison. They are responsible for conducting campership mailings in search of funding, coordinating with veteran groups for recruitment, and Easterseals Wisconsin staff and volunteers to ensure that camp runs smoothly and everyone attending has a great time.

But Don's favorite part, and what he looks most forward to each session, is the quality time he spends with his family. From nature walks to taking a trip on the Original Wisconsin Ducks Boat Tours to challenging his son on the high ropes course, he cherishes every minute. And because the camp is hosted at Easterseals Wisconsin Camps, an inclusive and accessible 400-acre camp for children and adults with disabilities, his daughter who has disabilities is able to enjoy an environment adapted for children just like her.

"One of the things my wife really appreciates is that the AmeriCorps members and camp counselors who volunteer for the veterans camp weekends are trained to care for children with disabilities. It allows us to participate in activities like the adults' dinner and Quilts of Valor ceremony held on Saturday night. We can relax and enjoy ourselves. We know she's in very capable hands, and it gives her a break from us as well!"

Over the years, Don and his family have come to love and support the mission of Easterseals Wisconsin Camps. He shared about their desire to give back, and how as a family, they enjoy participating in service projects that benefit the other campers who are normally served there. The family has built benches, flower boxes, and during one camp session, they noticed the TV in their cabin was broken. They took it upon themselves to purchase and install a new one so that future campers could enjoy it like they had.

As a family unit, they have made many lifelong friends from attending Veterans Family Camp. One of their fondest veteran family friends moved away to Indiana last year and the MacLeods encouraged them to try to still attend camp. They plan to do so this fall, as they said it has become such an important family tradition for them.

When Don recommends the camp to other veteran families, he always reiterates, "Why not give it a try? It's free!" He shares with them how it has impacted his family, about the friends they've made along the way, and the camaraderie between the veterans and their respective branches.

But he also exclaims, "The food is wonderful there! For the amount of people they serve – having been in the military – the bigger the group, the lousier the food gets. But not here! They don't slouch on the food at camp. It's always good!" Don's wife adds, "And the cookies! That's the hook!"

To learn more about Easterseals Wisconsin's Veterans Family Camp, visit www.eastersealswisconsin.com/veterans If you are interested in sponsoring a veteran and their family to attend camp, campership donations are accepted at: www.eastersealswisconsin.com/vetsupport

For over 90 years, Easterseals Wisconsin has provided services that help children and adults with disabilities gain greater independence. Easterseals Wisconsin's primary services – vocational rehabilitation, respite services, camping and recreation, information and referral, and public education – benefit close to 10,000 individuals with disabilities and their families each year throughout Wisconsin.

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