



Marines at a FOCUS Camp in 2014.

## MARINES HELPING MARINES

### Local foundation offers direction, healing for post-9/11 veterans

By SHEILA FRAYNE RHOADES

"We few, we happy few, we band of brothers," said the king to his soldiers in Shakespeare's "Henry V". The same may be said of the FOCUS Marines Foundation, a St. Louis-based nonprofit organization which has the sole purpose of helping wounded brothers and sisters – Marines and Navy corpsmen veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Following their discharge, many of these wounded veterans simply don't know where to go for guidance. They are saddened to leave the camaraderie of fellow Marines to face a life of uncertainty. Besides coping with physical disabilities, others also may suffer from invisible wounds. The challenges of survival outside The Corps can be overwhelming.

Fortunately there is help for this band of brothers.

In 2010, a group of U.S. Marine veterans in the St. Louis area formed the Midwest Marines Foundation, later renamed FOCUS. They understood these returning vets have a double need – to lift their fallen spirits, and give them direction and hope.

Ted Kretschmar, Creve Coeur resident and FOCUS' vice president of development, explained the program.

"FOCUS Marines Foundation offers significant assistance to veterans who are struggling with their transition from military to civilian lives. Our program consists of four seven-day FOCUS Camps per year in which the participants experience a change in their mind set about themselves and establish goals for their futures," Kretschmar said. "Most of the veterans we serve are battling invisible wounds, such as post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injury, survivor guilt, and others. Follow up mentoring is conducted by our team leaders.

"To date we have sponsored 18 FOCUS Camps serving 473 veterans. We are truly making a difference, changing and saving lives."

The program takes place at a private, secluded farm outside Augusta in St. Charles County. Here, participants can relax, reflect, explore and learn how to prepare themselves for meaningful and productive lives. Program content is presented by a variety of instructors and motivational speakers. The course is totally free. All expenses including transportation, lodging, meals and class materials are provided by FOCUS.

The nonprofit receives no funding from the government or the Marine Corps. It is funded via grants and cash donations.

Marines and Navy corpsmen throughout the United States, who are veterans of post-911 conflicts, and have significant physical or mental injuries, are eligible for FOCUS assistance. First priority are Purple Heart recipients; second are combat ribbon recipients, and third is simply any Marine who requests help.

Volunteers – 140 of them – make up an essential element of FOCUS, assisting participants in their sojourn.

"I noticed that many of the male volunteers are Marines that served in Korea and Vietnam," volunteer and former Marine Gene Bestgen, of Ballwin, commented. You never lose that feeling of 'The Proud and the Few,' of wanting to help a fellow Marine. It's especially satisfying to see the large number of non-military volunteers who want to contribute their experience, time and talent to help these wounded warriors."

Marines who served in either Iraq or Afghanistan and are in need of help, are encouraged to call (314) 957-8889 or to visit [www.focusmarinesfoundation.org](http://www.focusmarinesfoundation.org).

The next FOCUS session is Sept. 12-19.



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