

LETTERS FROM WOUNDED WARRIORS - FALL 2024

I wanted to express my sincere gratitude to the Copes (Phillip, Linda, and Jonathan), and the community of Panama City Beach for all their support during my week with the Warrior Beach Retreat. The Copes founded this non-profit organization after the injuries of their son. A military spouse at a different military event told me that I must sign up for the Warrior Beach Retreat. She was telling me about her experience, but her husband told her No! don't say anything else because they must experience it for themselves. Curiosity killed the cat because I signed up and several months later, I received a call about an opening that popped up. Once arriving at Embassy Suites by Hilton hotel, my husband and I received the royal treatment. We were able to valet park, I received roses, an initialized bag w/treats, a fruit basket, letters/drawings from students and several local schools, and escorted to our room. The Copes and the volunteers were so loving. During the week we went to several restaurants such as Capt Anderson's; Ford's Garage; American Charlie Grill & Tavern; Dat Cajun Place; the Pancakery; Carrabba's and the Deckhand Social. My husband and the men ate on the Jubilee while on a fishing trip and the women were getting Pampered at Serenity Spa by Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa in Miramar Beach. On Thursday the men had an opportunity to get haircuts from Great Clips and later met up at the Angry Tuna for lunch while the women were getting dolled- up with our hair at Ulta Salon and then our make-up at Clinique and Mac at Dillard's while the other ladies had their make-up done at Ulta as well. The Glam was in preparation for a professional photo-shoot, a parade, and a Ceremony honoring disabled veterans at Forest Park Church. The ceremony was beautiful, and I wanted to also shout out Brigadier General retired Greg Nelson for his time to speak about and to his fellow veterans. His message on healing and hope was inspiring. The service from the restaurants, the spa, the hair and make-up, and the activities events in the city were superb. There were other venues in the city we didn't get a chance to visit but I am forever grateful for the generosity. My husband and I got married at the very end of my time in the military and he did not serve in the military, but he was so impressed of the bond he built with the other husbands and men veterans in such a short time. We were both overjoyed by the support of the community. The Parade was so emotional and the US Navy standing by the fence brought me to tears. The police escort was exceptional. There are so many people to Thank, and I know I am missing people's names but the volunteers, many husbands and wives duos (and some never served in the Armed Forces) took it upon themselves to help the Copes to serve us. (Carl, Sharon, Tim, Tabitha, Mike, & Larry) Also at the Fish Fry all the volunteers and contributors to make this happen were phenomenal. This warrior Retreat was the epitome of the bible verse Ephesians 3:20. My husband

and I also enjoyed our time at Wonderworks and Coconut creek family fun park with 4 other veteran couples. We also made time to go on the Ferris Wheel at Sky Wheel and Sweet Frog. This retreat has been a week of bliss that I will never forget. God said write the vision and make it plain. God gave the vision to the Copes and many veterans including me, have received such a wonderful blessing on love and camaraderie. My wish is, the Copes are able to continue this retreat for as long as God allows. My heart is overflowing with Gratitude for the Copes and the community and city of Panama City Beach, Florida. I am grateful to my husband who had no idea of what I signed us up for; but trusted me and took time from his job and our kids to support me. Once the Parade was over, he told me that I and the other veterans deserved such an event. He said Shonda, it's great to get your flowers while you are alive to see them.

Shonda Blanks
USAF TSgt

Dear Panama City Beach Community,

On behalf of Vernessa Smith and I, we want to extend our sincerest thanks to each of you for your heartfelt support of the 2024 Warrior Beach Retreat which took place November 5th - 11th. Your kindness, generosity, and dedication to honoring our nation's heroes have truly made this retreat a special and impactful experience for us. We are always on the move, never really slowing down, but this week has truly been about rest and relaxation.

This retreat could not happen without the unwavering support of this wonderful community. From the local businesses that provided meals and accommodation, to the residents who lined the streets and cheered on veterans during the parade, each of you played a vital role in making all of us feel welcomed and honored. Your presence, your words of encouragement, and your acts of kindness have left a profound impact on the lives of not only us but the other veterans who attended, reminding them they are not alone in their journey.

Each gesture—big or small—has shown us that our sacrifices are appreciated, and their stories are valued. You have helped provide a sanctuary of healing and camaraderie that is priceless to those who have given so much. In times like these, it's easy to see why Panama City Beach is not just a beautiful place to visit, but a community filled with heart and patriotism.

Thank you for embracing the veterans and supporting Warrior Beach Retreat 2024. Your compassion and commitment to honoring these men and women are what make this retreat possible year after year. Philip, Linda, and Jonathan Cope, you are an awesome family.

Thank you,

Frederick Smith & Vernessa Smith

It's been said that Every life is a story. We would like to THANK YOU for being part of our forever story.

The story of goodness from our fellow man.

From the moment of arriving in the city of Panama Beach, we were able to feel the love. The love of community and this country.

It was best displayed through the Warrior Beach Retreat. Being invited to participate we didn't know what to expect. Which to our surprise proved to be an overwhelmingly astonishing great experience of love and support. This carefully curated retreat led by the Cope Family and its volunteers made each of us feel special in every way possible. Because of that we would like to thank the Warrior Beach Retreat, community of Panama City Beach, Panama City Police Escorts Team led by Lieutenant Grainger and Tim Bently, the volunteers, Embassy Suites, local restaurants (Capt. Anderson's, Olive Garden, Angry Tuna, Ford's Garage, American Charlie Grill & Tavern, Dat Cajun Place, The Pancakery, Carrabba's Italian Grill, The Deckhand Social), Forest Park Church, Oakland Terrace Clubhouse, Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa, Ulta Beauty Pier Park North, Jubilee Deep Sea Fishing, US Air Force Ret Brigadier General Greg and Debbie Nelson, and most importantly the founders of the Warrior Beach Retreat the Cope Family. We are grateful for the opportunity and experience given.

God bless you all!

Sincerely,

USN (Ret) Patrick and Tiffany Selden

SGT Erica and Kevin Thomas-Bey

To Linda, Phillip and Jonathan Cope you have been a blessing to my husband and I from the start. Your vision for this retreat tops any other retreat I have ever been to in my military career. The attention to every detail through emails and text messages before the retreat let me know that we were in for an amazing retreat. Jonathan, your spirit shines through and it was a pleasure to get to know you. When we stepped out of our jeep at the hotel you all poured love and blessings into our hearts. You all gave us hugs and made us feel welcome. Mike and Tabitha Nelson were the volunteers who took us to our rooms, and they made us feel special from the start. They stayed in the room with us and made sure that we were good before they left. All of the volunteers were amazing. Carl and Sharon, I totally appreciate your loyalty and commitment to the program. Carl you were our comedy relief and our daily pick-me-up. Sharon, you were a breath of fresh air, you always had a kind word to say, and I will forever love you for the conversations we shared. To Brig. General Greg Nelson and Betty Nelson, Thank You for the Bible and your dedication to the cause. Betty, I enjoyed our conversations, you are a God Send!!!

To the Panama City Beach Community, you guys rock. Every moment we were there you opened your arms to us and made us feel special. You lined the streets for the parade and made me proud to serve this great country. It's a blessing to know that you appreciate the service and the sacrifice we made for this country. Tim Bentley, you and the entire police department, Sheriff's Department and State Troopers of Panama City Beach especially Larry Grainger did a great job escorting us from the hotel to our destinations. Tim, you hold a special place in my heart because every day I was in your presence you acknowledged my husband and I, and all the other couples, and made sure that we were taken care of.

The whole week was planned out perfectly. The spa day was Amazing. A special thanks to The Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort and Spa. Your staff was so welcoming and made the ladies feel relaxed and appreciated. The limo ride there was everything. The ladies got to bond and share stories and appreciate each other's struggles.

I would like to give all of the restaurants we visited an A+. you gave your all. Your staff, your hospitality, your generosity, and your commitment to us. You all greeted

us with a generous and friendly staff, great food, wonderful atmosphere. I will definitely recommend you all to everyone I know visiting the area. Your reviews from me will be great.

To my make-up artist at MAC Cosmetics in Dillard's at Pier Park, you were everything. You let me know from the start that it was my day, and you were there to serve me. You let me take control of every aspect of my makeup. You gave me pointers and tips. You made me feel like royalty. I got your card and every trip I take to Panama City Beach I will visit you.

To Jubilee Deep Sea Fishing, my husband is so not an outdoors person, but he had so much to say about the way you guys understood him and made him feel welcome. He formed a bond with the fellas and will always be available to the guys if they need him. He enjoyed and will cherish the experience he had with you all.

For everyone who had their hands in the fish fry, the gift giving and the kids who wrote letters to the veterans, you have my heart. I was in tears reading all the letters. I was in tears seeing the dedication you all put into making sure you made our day. To the ladies that made us quilts I appreciate the time and the dedication you put into making the quilts, the bags and presenting them to us. For the veteran soldier that made the cutting board I won, I thank you for honoring us!!!

To the attractions on Panama City Beach that allowed us to visit for free, I appreciate the chance to enjoy your establishment and the many amenities you all offered.

And last but not least, the couples that went on this journey with me, we formed a special bond with each other that I will cherish for the rest of my life. You ladies were amazing on a daily basis. I feel like I have made some friends for life and I can call you all family. You will forever be in my heart!!!

MY HEART IS FULL!!!!!! I LOVE YOU ALL

SGT ERICA AND KEVIN THOMAS-BEY

US ARMY, RETIRED (DISABLED VETERAN, 30 YEARS

I want to extend my heartfelt thanks to the wonderful Panama City Beach community, families, volunteers, and sponsors for making the recent Warrior Beach Retreat, held from November 5-11, 2024, an unforgettable experience. It was an honor to be selected as one of the eight combat veteran couples, providing us with a week filled with meaningful gestures and incredible activities. From the thoughtful gifts, beautiful flowers, and heartfelt cards crafted by local students to the police escorts to dinner each night, the community's generosity was deeply felt.

We were treated to a spa day, a deep-sea fishing excursion, free admission to many local events and attractions, and a grand parade that celebrated each veteran in attendance. We will always remember the parade as the community support was over and beyond what we expected. A special thank you goes to Philip, Linda, Joshua, and Jonathan Cope, the dedicated founders and organizers of Warrior Beach Retreat, their Board of Directors, and the many volunteers who support the mission. Their vision and commitment to veterans have given us cherished memories and a renewed sense of community support.

Thank you, Panama City Beach, for making this retreat so impactful.

Sincerely,

COL (Ret.) Paula Edwards

To Whom It May Concern:

A Heartfelt Message of Gratitude from Our Family to the Panama City Community
Hello, we are "Joey" Santiago-Diaz and Lyanne Velazquez, and we recently bought a new home in Sanford, Florida where we live with our beautiful 8-month-old daughter, Isla Coral Santiago. Joey served in combat for 14 years and was honored with a Purple Heart for his service. The road has not been easy—PTSD and depression have cast a long shadow over our family, affecting our lives in ways we never expected. The emotional and mental challenges have been profound, and it has been an ongoing struggle to navigate the ups and downs while working to create a stable and loving home for our little one. As a family, we are actively seeking resources and support to improve our well-being and find stability. We know that healing is possible, but we also recognize that it requires us to reach out, seek help, and be open to new paths. Both of us are Christians, and we believe that GOD is guiding us toward a different future. A future where we can find peace,

rebuild, and thrive as a family! This retreat has given us the opportunity to connect with others who understand our journey, and we are grateful for the chance to be part of this community. From the moment we arrived at Warrior Beach Retreat from November 5th to November 11th, 2024, we were overwhelmed by the kindness and generosity that surrounded us. We had no idea how many people were quietly working behind the scenes to make sure everything was perfect for us. The way they treated us like family, with so much love and care, left us truly humbled. Warrior Beach Retreat gave us the chance to connect deeply with others who truly understand what it means to be a military spouse and caregiver. As I write this, my heart is full, and I can't help but tear up, knowing how much this experience will stay with me forever. The bond we share with other spouses is grounded in resilience, sacrifice, and love, and this retreat allowed us to truly be present with others who walk the same path. We're deeply grateful for the opportunity to slow down, reflect, and find peace in the company of people who truly understand. The connections we've made here will last a lifetime. We want to express our deepest gratitude to Linda and Philip Cope for making all of this possible. They've created something truly remarkable, bringing together so many incredible people who share this journey. We're also incredibly thankful to the entire community of individuals who support veterans and their families—the local sheriff's office that provided the escort, VA advocates, the volunteers who prepared food, donated gifts, and gave their time selflessly, the Panama City residents who turned out for the parade, the school kids, and so many others. Your unwavering support, dedication, and generosity make a world of difference. We didn't even know something like this existed, but we're so grateful it does. The peace and love we felt here were beyond words, and we sincerely hope there are more moments like this in the future.

Sincerely,

Lyanne Velazquez &

Joey Santiago-Diaz (Army Sergeant, 2006–2017)