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Helping heroes heal

The Vail Veterans Program rings in 20 years as it welcomes 22 injured service members and their families to experience the power of the mountains. **A3**

LOCAL

Eagle Valley High School's 2024 Wish Week rallies around 4-year-old Silverthorne girl with cystic fibrosis. **FOR THE FULL STORY, SEE PAGE A2.**

REGION

Colorado River's Upper Basin states say 'no way' to cuts proposed by Lower Basin states. **SEE PAGE A4.**

arts & entertainment

Ski with an Olympian, celebrate Vail's history and meet celebrity bartenders this weekend in Vail — Tricia's Weekend Picks. **SEE PAGE A20.**

SPORTS & OUTDOORS

Vail and Carbondale athletes team up to win skimo team national title. **SEE PAGE A28.**

WEATHER



Mia Giatras

Stone Creek Charter School

Cloudy

High 34; Low 10 — Weather A26

FALCON'S PERCH



A prairie falcon, photographed last week along the Colorado River Road.

TRACI O'CONNOR/FOR THE VAIL DAILY



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GLOBAL PROPERTIES

Vail Veterans Program celebrates 20 years

Nonprofit has provided life-changing events for over 4,700 wounded service members and their families

Tricia Swenson
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The Vail Valley-based nonprofit Vail Veterans Program celebrated a 20-year milestone this week as it welcomed 22 injured military service members along with their guests and staff from Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland, and Brooke Army Medical Center for the Intrepid in San Antonio, Texas.

Since 2004, the Vail Veterans Program has provided life-changing events at no cost for over 4,700 wounded service members and their families, delivering over 12,000 program days and positively impacting the lives of our nation's heroes.

The Vail Veterans Program was started by Cheryl Jensen in

the spring of 2004. A few chance meetings in Washington, D.C., and Vail spurred the idea to bring wounded veterans out to the slopes to help them heal.

"Two decades ago, this journey began as a humble vision, a belief that nature and skiing could transform the lives of our nation's heroes," Jensen said. She had heard about Walter Reed National Military Medical Center while on a trip to Washington, D.C., for another nonprofit she led.

In 2003, just months after the war in Iraq started, Jensen met then-Army Captain David Rozelle while he was speaking at a conference in Vail. Rozelle had lost his leg while serving in Iraq and Jensen shared her idea to bring wounded service members to Vail to learn adaptive skiing. Together, they secured funding and Rozelle provided the introduction to patients at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, resulting in seven wounded veterans coming to Vail and learning to ski.

"I'm in a little shock that it is our



VAIL VETERANS PROGRAM/COURTESY PHOTO

The Vail Veterans Program was designed to bring military injured and their families to take part in transformative programs in the Rocky Mountains.

VETERANS, A12

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VAIL VETERANS PROGRAM/COURTESY PHOTO

Founder of the Vail Veterans Program Cheryl Jensen, in red ski pants kneeling in the front row, takes a group photo with program participants, local veterans and adaptive instructors from the Vail Ski and Snowboard School on Vail Mountain.

VETERANS

From page A3

20th year of serving veterans because I have personally measured it more on the number of veterans and family members that we served,” Rozelle said. “That growth continues based on lives saved and families who reconnected at these events. In 20 years, this program has touched veterans and their families like no other program.”

HEALING IN THE MOUNTAINS

One veteran from that first group of seven is Army Staff Sergeant Heath Calhoun (Ret.). Calhoun attended the inaugural Winter Program in 2004 just months after he had lost both legs in Iraq when he was hit with a

grenade while serving in the 101st Airborne Division in 2003. On the last night of the program, he had this to say to Jensen.

“I don’t know why you did this for us, but you changed my life,” Calhoun said.

That comment struck a chord with Jensen and the Vail Veterans Program went from being a one-time event to something Jensen knew she had to continue.

“Through tears, I realized the importance of what we had created,” Jensen said.

Calhoun was back this week for the 20th anniversary of the Vail Veterans Program and spoke about his comments to Jensen.

“She remembers it way better than

I do. This was 20 years ago and I was just a young, dumb kid at the time, but she was planning on this being one-and-done but the need was just growing at that time, and when she realized it was life-changing to others, she understood that it needed to happen again,” Calhoun said. “There’s a lot of healing in sports. This is a great program, a great idea and it does change lives.”

Calhoun went on to join the U.S. Paralympic Ski Team and competed in the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, Canada, and the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia, and won a silver medal for the team. Jensen went to Canada to cheer him on.

VETERANS, A14

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VETERANS

From page A12

'IT COMES FULL CIRCLE'

Another veteran who benefited from the Vail Veterans Program is Army Col. Greg Gadson (Ret.). He came out for the summer program after losing both his legs in an IED attack in Iraq in 2007. He is now one of the Vail Veterans Program's ambassadors.

"The power of the mountain is what's so special about this program and also Cheryl's vision to involve the whole community. Cheryl and her husband Bill epitomize selflessness and they have mobilized the patriotism, will and generosity of a community to help those who defend this nation heal," Gadson said. "Vail's roots are here with the 10th Mountain Division and I'm extremely proud of that because those men of the 10th Mountain Division went over there and served their country and they came back and could have never imagined what they created, so it is only fitting that a place created and envisioned by veterans is now helping veterans and families heal. It comes full circle."

After two decades the Vail Veterans Program not only offers winter outdoor sports programming but also summer outdoor programs, military caregiver programs, family support programs and more.

"My most profound takeaway from two decades of programming for wounded service members is the indomitable spirit and resilience that veterans exhibit in the face of adversity," Jensen said. "I have seen firsthand the unwavering courage,

determination and inner strength it takes for them to try to accept and begin to overcome their physical and invisible wounds."

Rozelle recalls that when he was a newly injured veteran, outdoor programming seemed intimidating.

"Within a few months of injury, you're being carted off to the mountains. Getting around town and into a hotel room seems difficult

as you learn how to adapt outside the hospital. But when you get on the snow, you don't feel crippled anymore. There is a freedom in skiing that cannot be replaced by any other physical activity. You go from a wheelchair or crutches and you learn to fly."

To learn about how you can support the Vail Veterans Program, go to VailVeteransProgram.org.



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