

# Wounded veterans and their families find healing in the Vail Valley

## Vail Veterans Program hosts Summer Family Program this week

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Vail Veterans Program families enjoyed a great week of healing in the mountains July 14-19.

Vail Veterans Program/Courtesy photo

The Vail Veterans Program welcomed 17 wounded veterans, 15 spouses and caregivers and 33 kids to the Vail Valley earlier this week for five days of adventurous activities and events that promote family time in the Rocky Mountains. The days were spent rafting, rock climbing and zip lining while the nights were filled with opportunities to connect with other military wounded and share experiences.

The Gonzalez family of four from Texas were first-time participants in the Vail Veterans Program Summer Family Program. They had driven to Vail for a trip years ago but had never experienced the area quite like this.

Raul Gonzalez, Jr. was a sergeant in the U.S. Army and an infantry paratrooper team leader. He was joined by his wife, Debra, and twin sons, Miguel Gonzalez and Raul Gonzalez, III, who are 13. As a family, they dove right into all the events and activities.

“The first day we did whitewater rafting, which was something I don’t think we ever would have done just on our own. Mostly because I didn’t want to do it,” Debra Gonzalez said. “But since it was on the schedule, we tried it. And I’m really glad we did. It was really fun, we all got to do it together and I realized it was way more fun than it was scary.”

“Yesterday, we did rock climbing, which is something I think we probably also would have never done, but we got to do it together,” Raul Gonzalez, Jr. said. “It was a great experience and we all had fun. It was a great week and we all enjoyed it.”



“Not knowing what path out of high school to take, I enlisted in the U.S. Army and just decided, ‘Let’s just go all in.’ So, I was in the airborne infantry and jumped out of planes. I ended up overseas with a bunch of great guys. They love this country, man. You just train to protect the country. But in doing that, there are risks and there was an incident that happened to me, IEDs, explosions, and I ended up getting hurt because of that,” Raul Gonzalez, Jr. said.

“There were guys that lost their lives. I was lucky, I guess, or it just wasn’t my day. But recovering from that, I mean, it’s every day,” Raul Gonzalez, Jr. said. “I close my eyes and sometimes I smell it. I feel it. I see it. There are times I’m by myself and it just feels like I’m there, like it was just yesterday. So, the healing process, it’s every day. Sometimes it just feels like instead of moving forward, I might have an episode and it just took me back six months. And then, I try again.”

## The healing power of the mountains

Raul Gonzalez, Jr. is not alone and got to meet veterans in similar situations while at the Vail Veterans Program, which has provided life-changing programs at no cost to over 4,700 wounded veterans, delivering more than 12,000 program days through the healing powers of the mountains. Early programs offered skiing and snowboarding for veterans and their families, and then summer programming was added.

“Now in our 20th year, our healing, therapeutic programs are as important today as they were in 2004, helping to support our wounded veterans and their families overcome visible and invisible injuries from their military service,” said Jen Brown, executive director of the Vail Veterans Program. “It’s incredible to see how quickly all of the kids and families bond and how grateful everyone is to realize the support they have from our community, which makes a meaningful difference in their lives.”

Raul Gonzalez, Jr. cares deeply about his kids and wife and their well-being considering his injury.

“It’s like that quote: ‘My husband’s not the same man he was before he left’ or ‘the guy that I got back is not the same guy that I married.’” Raul Gonzalez, Jr. said. “And that trickles down to the family, my sons. I’m so glad they can all be here with me.”

Meeting other families at the Vail Veterans Program helped the whole Gonzales family.





“Here, you’re put in a situation where you sit down and you break bread together and then you find out that there are other people out there that are dealing with the same things,” Raul Gonzalez, Jr. said.

“It’s nice to connect here because I think when you are in the military, the way you meet spouses and the bonds that you create are very different from civilian life,” Debra Gonzalez said. “I think we understand each other better because we know what we’re going through at home and it’s not easy to share those things with a person that has never experienced it.”



From left, Raul Gonzalez, III, Debra Gonzalez, Miguel Gonzalez and Raul Gonzalez, Jr. enjoy bowling as part of the evening events at this week’s Vail Veterans Program retreat. Vail Veterans Program/Courtesy photo

The family feels recharged after experiencing everything this past week and shared their takeaways of the program.

“Just being able to recharge with the whole family and being able to spend all that time together and really just lean on each other has been great,” Miguel Gonzalez said.

“We got to connect during the rafting and rock climbing and as a group, we’re going to succeed, we just all have to connect and understand each other,” said Raul Gonzalez, III.

“My takeaway from being at the Vail Veterans Program is to stop, take a minute, breathe, look around. Look at the gift that God gave you. You’re allowed to enjoy it in this wonderful country that we have,” Raul Gonzalez, Jr. said. “We’re reminded to love each other. Take care of each other. Hey, we’re there to help each other, push each other. So, that builds that circle again.”

To learn more about the Vail Veterans Program and the programs it offers, how you can volunteer or donate, go to [VailVeteransProgram.org](https://www.vailveteransprogram.org).