

Local Couple Finds Way to Give Back to Vets

By Eleanor Gomolinski-Lally

Lorton residents and former Marine officers Christopher and Peggy Carr have found a unique way to give back to veterans who were wounded in Iraq or Afghanistan. They have started an all-volunteer nonprofit organization called Vacations for Veterans.

Chris is a native of Washington, DC, born in 1964. After high school graduation, he joined the Marine Reserve and went to boot camp in Parris Island in 1982. While in the Reserve, he attended Loyola University in New Orleans and earned a BA degree in history. In 1988, he went to officer candidate school (OCS) and basic school at Quantico and led an infantry platoon during Operation Desert Storm. He remained in the Marine Corps for 17 years.

Peggy was born in New York City in 1966 and grew up on Long Island. After high school, she earned a BA in international relations and marketing from the University of Pennsylvania. Uncertain of what career path to follow, she was influenced by the book *Women in the Military* and decided to apply for OCS in Quantico in 1989. From OCS and basic school, she went to Camp Pendleton in California to the School of Infantry, where she was a legal officer from 1990 to 1993. She received a JD at San Diego School of Law.

Peggy and Chris were in the same class at OCS at Quantico, but didn't know each other, although Chris had noticed her. Peggy had to leave training because of an injury, but returned later to finish. In the meantime, Chris went to Camp Pendleton. Set up on a blind date by Col. John Meagher for the 1995 Marine Corps Ball, Chris and Peggy were married one year later.

After Chris left the Marine Corps, he and his wife decided to settle in this area near their families. They lived in South Riding in Loudoun County from 2000 to 2004. Chris had not known anything about Mason Neck but after exploring the area and hiking through the state park, he convinced Peggy to have a look. They both loved the area's natural beauty and decided it was a great place to raise their two boys and two girls.

Chris is director of video markets for Masergy Communications. Peggy started an Internet business called Exclusive Exchanges, a service that links people who want to exchange their luxury homes with someone in another area for vacations. Peggy noticed on her Web site that many of the vacation homes had vacant weeks, and the idea occurred to her that some of the homeowners might be willing to donate a week of time to a recently wounded veteran, many of whom would not be able to afford a vacation.

Peggy says, "Even before the Web site was ready, we had sent out a letter to various vacation homeowners across the United States, and the response has been heartwarming." John Erwin, who lives in Winter Park, CO, said in a phone conversation that he was happy to donate his condo because of his experience in learning to deal with a disability. During the Vietnam War, he served in Hawaii in Navy intelligence, not in combat. He returned home to a farm in Maryland. As a result of a tractor accident, he had to have a leg amputated at the age of 33. As an amputee, he was invited to ski in the Rockies at the National Center for the Disabled. He was so taken with Colorado he ended up buying three condos and eventually built a house there. He looks forward to donating a condo to an amputee who can take advantage of the ski instruction at the nearby center. The Carrs' neighbors, Chris and Gina Hamilton, have donated their Wintergreen resort home to an Arlington veteran who lost an arm in Iraq who wants to get away to the mountains.

There are now approximately 85,000 wounded veterans, many of whom have spent extensive time in hospitals and rehabilitation centers. Because of the stress caused in adjusting to their injuries, time spent in a vacation setting can be healing. Chris locates veterans who are eligible. They must supply proof of their status. Participating homeowners are assured of security and cleaning fees. Contributions to cover these expenses come from people who make cash donations. Vacations for Veterans has been designated as a 501(c)(3) public charity. Contributions are tax deductible. Volunteers for administrative needs are welcome. To learn more about how to help, visit www.vacationsforveterans.org, or e-mail chris@vacationsforveterans.org.