



Higher Ground

Healing America's wounded
veterans through sports

A program of Sun Valley Adaptive Sports

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Features

Taking Vets to "Higher Ground" (Après ski party in Sun Valley rallies new supporters)

Sun Valley Adaptive Sports continues legacy of rehabilitation-related recreation and therapy for wounded veterans

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For injured soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, rehabilitation and re-acclimation to civilian life can be tough. Leading the nation as one of the largest wounded warrior adaptive sports organizations, Sun Valley Adaptive Sports is helping injured veterans live their lives off the battlefield.

In honor of the work and success stories of Sun Valley Adaptive Sports' Higher Ground sports camp, Ambassador George Argyros and his wife, Julie, Sun Valley Resort owners Earl and Carol Holding, plus supporters Michael and Chris Boskin and Terry and Susie Ring held an après-ski party for the program at the Sun Valley Club on Tuesday, Dec. 29.

The event was not a fundraiser—its purpose was to celebrate the growth and national recognition of Higher Ground and to introduce more than 200 new major donors to the organization.

"Many people think the signature wound of war is a guy in a wheelchair and a guy with an amputation," said Tom Iselin, founder and executive director of Higher Ground and executive director of Sun Valley Adaptive Sports. "The truth is, there have only been about 300 spinal cord injuries and 1,800 amputations. But, there have been 350,000 traumatic brain injuries and 350,000 post-traumatic brain injuries—all of varying degrees."

Higher Ground uses sports, family and coping therapies to rehabilitate men and women who have been severely wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan. It specializes in serving those with traumatic brain injuries, post-traumatic stress disorder, blindness, spinal cord injuries and amputations.



From left to right, Jim Bronson, Christine Holding, Earl Holding, Carol Holding and Stephen Holding gather at the Sun Valley Club to honor Sun Valley Adaptive Sports.
Photo by David N. Seelig



The event hosted and celebrated 210 attendees and acknowledged Sun Valley's history in rehabilitating war veterans, which began with those returning from World War II.

"This town has a long history of caring for wounded veterans," Iselin said. "Sun Valley Resort closed its doors to the public for three years and was transformed into a Naval convalescent hospital. More than 7,000 men and women of the armed forces who were wounded at the battles of Iwo Jima and Okinawa and other battles came to Sun Valley to rehabilitate."

According to "Sun Valley: An Extraordinary History" by Wendolyn Holland, the lodge was commissioned as a hospital on July 1, 1943. The lodge offered more than 20 sports activities and even the nurses were required to recreate four hours a day.

"Sun Valley was one of the few hospitals to use 'group therapy' and was one of the early leaders to treat 'shell shock'—today know as post-traumatic stress disorder—just like we do," Iselin said. "Sun Valley Resort provided a historic service for the men and women who honorably served during World War II, and it's with great pride and honor [that] Higher Ground continues this legacy."

Higher Ground offers weeklong small-group therapeutic sports camps, including a watersports camp at Pettit Lake and a fly-fishing camp in the Wood River Valley.

"According to many at the Pentagon, military hospitals and VA centers around the country, Higher Ground is the gold standard," Iselin said. "We build physical skills, but we also build self-confidence and spousal relationships, and give these couples hope and courage, and sense of purpose and passion in life, providing coping strategies to help them manage their stress, anxiety, depression and isolation."

Iselin said the camp attendees take the skills they learned back to their hometowns and apply them to work, school, family, health, relationships and involvement in their communities.

"We don't offer 'assisted vacations.'" Iselin said. "We focus on providing a lasting, meaningful therapeutic experience. We include spouses and caregivers because we believe they've suffered just as much trauma as the warriors."

Staff Sgt. Julio Quiles attended the Higher Ground watersports camp at Pettit Lake last summer and was invited to the Sun Valley Club event to talk about his experience. He suffers with PTSD, TBI cognitive and other physical ailments.

"I was deployed three times and served in two wars," Quiles told the audience. "After retiring from my military experience, Higher Ground has given me the hope and motivation to keep moving forward and have a positive outlook as I transitioned into civilian living. Higher Ground was an invaluable experience."

Quiles said his experience at Pettit Lake helped his wife develop a better understanding of his medical and physical disabilities. In addition, Quiles said Higher Ground created a therapeutic, tranquil, non-threatening environment that allowed him to open up and communicate without the feeling of being judged.

"Higher Ground has truly given me the motivation to move forward," Quiles said. "I aspire to return to school for the third time ... Most important, I want to thank the camp for giving my wife the courage to open up about her condition and help me cope with it. After hearing a staff member's breast cancer survivor story, my wife shared with me [that] she was suffering from the same condition. They helped me cope with my emotions so I can be there for her."



Support for Higher Ground goes beyond Sun Valley. Chase Merritt, a real estate development firm in Newport Beach, Calif., held a fundraising event for Higher Ground at the Balboa Bay Club on Dec 17. Four hundred people attended the event, which raised \$50,000. The casino-night-theme fundraiser included poker chip sales, which all went to Higher Ground.

"My aunt and uncle, Michael and Chris Boskin, are big supporters of Higher Ground," said Chris Dornin, Chase Merritt chief investment officer. "We wanted to celebrate the end of a challenging economic year in real estate. We wanted to support our troops and veterans."

Dornin said the event came together in two weeks and Chase Merritt is planning for it to be an annual event and raising the fundraising goal substantially higher.

Several more fundraising events are planned for locations across the nation, including Palm Desert, Boise, Atlanta and New York. In addition, Higher Ground will conduct 16 more camps over the next two years, including a surf camp in June in La Jolla, Calif.

