We are family: Disabled Sports Eastern Sierra and Mammoth Mountain Host Operation Mountain Freedom

They came from nearby Camp Pendleton, Balboa, Agoura Hills, Rialto and Fontana in California, and as far away as Washington, Georgia, Florida, Virginia and even the Philippines. Disabled Sports Eastern Sierra (DSES) brought two-dozen Wounded Warriors from all branches of the armed services, including several who served in Korea and Vietnam, to Mammoth Mountain Ski Area (MMSA) for their 9th annual Operation Mountain Freedom winter camp, Jan. 26-30. The Warriors received expert instruction from DSES’s awesome volunteer instructors in Alpine skiing, snowboarding and cross-country skiing and went tubing at Woolly’s Tube Park. Local sponsors once again included ML Fire Department, the Curry family and friends, Burgers Restaurant, Westin Monache Resort, Good Life Café, Sue Ebersold, Eastern Sierra Transit Authority and most generously, Mammoth Mountain Ski Area, which served as host and base of operations for the week. Also on hand were local officials, first responders and a representative from Mammoth’s U.S. Congressman Paul Cook’s office.

During the camp, Fox News Channel recorded interviews and other clips of the warriors in action for a national segment about DSES’s newest endeavor, the National Wounded Warrior Center, which aired as part of The Kelly File with Megyn Kelly on Friday evening. Mammoth Lakes local Trace Gallagher, now a major reporter at Fox News, hosted the segment.

DSES’s program, which has been vetted and approved by Wounded Warriors Battalion West, pulls in its share of brass, as well. This year’s special guests included Brigadier General Dan Yoo, USMC, Lt. General TS Jones, USMC (ret.), Col. Scott Leonard, USMC, commander at Pickel Meadows Marine Warfare Training Center, and Col. “Willy” Buhl, USMC, Director Expeditionary Operations Training Group.

During Thursday’s special luncheon, MMSA COO Greg Dallas described the ski area’s relationship with DSES Executive Director Kathy Copeland and the Warriors as part of one large family. “We make a significant investment in DSES each year,” he noted, “and dollar for dollar it’s one of our best investments, since it goes right into those people who need it.” Dallas also reiterated that skiing for alumni Wounded Warriors and their families is free, courtesy of MMSA.
During lunch, Copeland was presented with a $20,000 donation toward the National Wounded Warrior Center on behalf of members of 6-67 Monument, an organization honoring the memories of 50 classmates from Marine Corps Basic Class 6-67 from 1967, who made the ultimate sacrifice. John Propis and Jack Wells from 6-67 Monument were on hand to present the check, along with fellow 6-67 classmate and longtime DSES supporter Steve Colwell, who introduced Copeland to Propis and Wells.

Gen. Yoo praised the “leadership provided by Kathy [Copeland], Greg [Dallas],” and called Disabled Sports Eastern Sierra’s planned National Wounded Warrior Center a “great endeavor.” Yoo also invoked the memory of one of DSES’s earliest founders, Terry Smutney, a veteran of the first Gulf War, and the inspiration for Copeland bringing Wounded Warriors into the DSES family. “One thing we’ve learned is that the physical body recovers,” Yoo said, “but we have to address the mental challenges of the future. You have a good thing going here. Not all NPOs are the same. Your new name should be ‘mountain healers.’”

Keynote speaker TS Jones, who has logged 36 years of active duty service, helped the Marine Corps with streamlining and standardizing its training methods, and established his own non-profit Outdoor Odyssey Leadership Academy, stirred the room with a rousing, inspirational address that stressed how we handle life’s “defining” moments. and finding balance. “If I can do this, then I can do anything is true, but only if you have a plan,” he said. “What am I going to do and how am I going to do it?” Jones’s plan is to help Copeland develop and build the National Wounded Warrior Center as a member of its advisory board. “I had a 15-minute call with Kathy that lasted two and a half hours,” he joked. “This week was another shining example of challenges and hope through recreational activities that address the physical, cognitive and emotional needs of these men and women.”

Copeland thanked the “community of friends and family” who make this event possible. “Wounded Warriors are dear to our heart,” she said. “This is our time to fight for them. We need to do more, kick-start them, give them the knowledge that they can do this. Mammoth Lakes has embraced [the NWWC], with offers of internships, job opportunities and more. This isn’t just me; it’s the community that’s behind this. It will be a safe haven where they can learn, heal and thrive. We need to get the NWWC built.”

She also recognized Barry Zimmerman, who will raise funds and awareness for the NWWC when he competes in the Boston Marathon this spring, sporting a “NWWC Run For Heroes” running shirt!

The next Wounded Warriors camp is the Operation High Altitude summer camp, June 1-5.