

The Healing Spirit of God The We Serve Fireside Program

We Serve was founded in 2012 in Washington, D.C. by military service members representing all branches of the armed services and spanning all generations between World War Two and the Global War on Terror. We Serve was founded to recognize and honor the voices of our nation's veterans, to include a plan to provide recognition for organizations and people that Veterans believe are the most effective in helping them heal spiritually. We are dedicated to building community based on the belief in a power greater than ourselves, the Lord Our Savior, Jesus Christ. We assert that war is both archetypal and wounding of everyone it touches. It changes every part of us--body, mind, heart, soul, spirit, relationships and communities. We believe that invisible wounds of military service such as PTSD are not a failure of character but proof of warrior's mortality and humanity.

The key concept of the Firesides is that active duty military, veterans and military family members are brought together in a sacred space such as a ward or parish hall. These venues permit a deeper reflection on the spiritual element of healing and remind all participants of the presence of spirit and order of a higher power. Ultimately, the Fireside Program will grow into a worldwide fellowship that gathers together to share common experiences in military service, and to help one another heal the in body, mind and spirit.

The We Serve Fireside Leadership Training Program™ is a sustained program of education, resource materials, and interactive online and live events on local, regional and national levels that recruit and support those who wish to conduct Firesides in their communities at faith-based venues.

What inspired the Fireside Program?

The Fireside Program was developed to combine the sacred space of faith-based institutions with the camaraderie of veteran's posts, lodges and auxiliaries by using principles and traditions similar to the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) 12 Steps and 12 Traditions to sustain spiritual healing. From personal experiences and 12 years of research, interviews and writing about veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, it became clear to We Serve that the power of community and sharing experiences of war as a healing mechanism was, and still is, overlooked by both public and private entities alike. The high rates of substance abuse, suicide, homelessness, alienation, self-isolation, unemployment, and relationship fragmentation were not being resolved through therapies put forth by government agencies or many of the Veterans Service Providers (VSPs). America needs a significant holistic healing program, on a national scale, to

remedy the wounds of our military men and women returning from combat to their families and communities. Over four million veterans have been wounded defending our nation since its founding. We Serve is determined to address those veterans who remain with us, to heal the wounds of body, mind and soul using a holistic approach based on spiritual healing.

The Fireside program went through numerous permutations and beta testing at both the Washington, D.C. LDS Temple Visitors' Center and the Church of the Immaculate Conception. It became clear that Firesides should be specifically located in safe and sacred spaces associated with faith so that participants and their discussions were infused with a sense of dignity, credibility, spirit and trust. Initial reactions to the Firesides was extremely positive. Groups were intimate and forthcoming, engaging in lively and thoughtful discussions about experiences in military service, both on deployment and on the home front. After successful Fireside programs in 2014, during the summer of 2015, We Serve began a regularly scheduled Fireside program at 6:00 PM on the fourth Sunday of every month at the Washington, DC Temple Visitors' Center.

Why are Firesides important to returning veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan?

It is critical that Firesides provide opportunities veterans to share personal stories and listen to others in face-to-face personal environments. In today's highly-fragmented, impersonal and technically fast-paced society, where social media takes precedence over human contact, our nation's veterans are increasingly isolated and alienated--particularly those who have served during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. As the longest wars in our nation's history continue, the over 2.5 million men and women who served still represent only 1 percent of America's population. Their invisible war wounds (which can be as real as visible wounds and often more debilitating) are neglected and ignored. 22 plus veterans commit suicide every day, over 8,000 per year, much higher than the civilian suicide rate. More than half of these suicides are committed by veterans over the age of fifty. This statistic has not changed in five years.

Veterans posts, lodges and auxiliaries – a thing of the past.

Veteran's posts, lodges and auxiliaries trace their roots back to 1899 when veterans of the Spanish-American War (1898) and the Philippine Insurrection (1899-1902) founded local organizations to secure rights and benefits for their service: many arrived home wounded or sick. There was no medical care or veterans' pension for them, and they were left to care for themselves.

Veterans banded together and formed organizations to support, educate and serve veterans and their families. In short order, these organizations grew into the millions of members and were gathering places for military service members, veterans and their families to share their experiences. In generations past, it was not uncommon to find these organizations in almost

every community in the United States, and the unspoken welcome was palatable. If you were a member of the military, you were at home. Sadly, long before 9/11 these halls as a gathering place for military, particularly those serving in Iraq and Afghanistan have become less-effective in reaching out to younger veterans. The bonding and camaraderie between fellow soldiers that comes from sitting at a common table and sharing stories along with the feeling of support from their squadron or platoon is, sadly, largely a thing of the past. The therapeutic benefits inherent in these types of gatherings are lost to our youngest generation of warriors.

How do Firesides align with technology?

In this age of technology, our youngest veterans and most family members communicate via social media (Facebook and Twitter) on devices such as smart phones, email, texting and Skype. While these technologies have changed our world and the way we communicate with each other, they have also depersonalized it. There are fewer and fewer opportunities for veterans to talk to one another face-to-face and share their experiences through fellowship on a personal and intimate basis. Without recourse to the traditional nurturing of warriors when they return from battle, the spiritual wounds of war cannot heal. War cracks the lives of everyone, unmasking the most extreme emotions, fuels the deepest existential questions and then leaves literally millions of veterans isolated and alone without the bonds of love and loyalty they knew while serving. Their return home becomes the most difficult part of the journey. The same inherently impersonal technology that enables today's veterans to instantly interact and communicate with the world creates both the need and demand for the Fireside Chat Program.

The use and reliance on technology has robbed younger generations of the strong and warm God-designed interaction crucial to sustainment of personal well-being. The greater the reliance on technology, the greater the veteran becomes isolated from the rest of the world. However, technology can be used to break through that isolation. When intimate trust or contact ceases to exist between the family and the active duty member or veteran, We Serve can bridge the connection through secure virtual messaging among veterans -- opening the door to the path of healing. The We Serve Fireside training series equips missionaries and others to deliver a program of support. After completing the We Serve Fireside training at a university, or at a scheduled national, regional, or stake program, missionaries and others working with military and veteran communities can review the entire We Serve training program virtually.

What is Military Culture and how does it change a person?

The military has a fundamental emotional, physical and even spiritual effect on those who serve. Military training is designed to transform civilians into soldiers—men and women whose

purpose is to defend our way of life by taking others' lives and giving up their own when that sacrifice is required for the United States. The We Serve Fireside Training Program™ includes sections on Recruitment, Basic Training, Advanced Training and Deployment to War in order to understand and reflect on the purpose of military culture in more detail. We stress that while the physical wounds of those returned from combat may be apparent, there are also invisible wounds in the minds, hearts and souls of veterans, whether or not they participated in direct combat operations.

The application of technology to warfare means that today's soldiers participate in war even while "behind the wire" or stationed stateside. War, particularly in the case of repeated deployments as we have seen with our National Guard and Reserve troops over the past 14 years, can yield wounds that are left unseen and untreated upon separation. This remains a startling truth even as we reduce the number of American physical casualties and deaths. While it takes years of training to transform a civilian to a soldier, troops generally receive only a few days' worth of transition skills training as they leave military service. Whether at the end of a decades-long career or a couple of years' commitment, these precious few days are often not enough to even begin to address real problems.

Why do so many veterans yearn for the fellowship of other veterans over civilian relationships?

Finally, there is a common bond that grows from serving with others in battle. Soldiers would say that they would die to protect their buddies in battle. The Warrior Ethos: "I will never leave a fallen comrade," is ingrained on every service man and woman that has served in the United States military. The total dependency on others to stay alive becomes in itself, a way of life. Once the platoon, squadron or team is disbanded, individual soldiers report feeling lost and "at sea." The Firesides forum replicates the military bonding experience as service members return again and again to listen to others and share their own stories.

A Fireside is a fellowship of military service men and women who share their experiences, strength and hope with each other in order to solve or help them deal with their common problems while helping others to recover from feelings of hurt, isolation, loss, survivors guilt, and reprogramming to such an extent that he / she no longer feels part of their former home environment.

The only requirement to attend a Fireside is a desire to listen, be understood, not be alone, and to find peace. There are no dues or fees to attend. Active duty, veterans and military family members are always welcome. It has been our experience that in some cases active duty military and veteran attendees can experience difficulty expressing themselves completely when family members are present. For that reason, while we welcome family members and

recognize their need for spiritual healing, the focus of the Firesides must remain on the current and past service members. In some cases it may be helpful to have a separate but concurrent military family member meeting.

The We Serve Fireside program is a ministry with the mission of healing the bruised soul. All veteran members are themselves recovering from a lack of peace due to military service and experiences at war – the causes being many and different.

Attendees are as diverse in education, career path, experience, age, gender, ethnicity and socio economic position as America itself. Veterans do not have to sign up or submit an application to be an attendee. Veterans, active duty and military family members simply choose to attend a Fireside. Veterans can come and go as they please. They work best through the offer of help and suggestion only. Firesides can be as small as two people or as large as 50 or more. The number of attendees is not relevant in and of itself so long as attendees find a safe and comforting harbor and inspiration to heal in body, mind and spirit.

Firesides work as veterans share their stories of what they used to be like, what happened, and what they are like now. Firesides usually take place in the evenings and are generally one to two hours in length. There is always an opening and closing prayer.

The We Serve Fireside Program is based on a foundation of confidentiality. There are no audio recordings or filming at any gatherings. Participants are requested to turn off their cell phones and leave them in a secured lock box. Use of first names only with no reference to ranks or positions in the military keeps everyone on the same personal frame of reference. Veterans can trust that no story or experience will ever be published or repeated outside of the gathering.

The atmosphere of confidentiality helps build trust and security. Service members, veterans and members of the military family who attend must feel safe sharing their stories with others as they heal and connect with brothers- and sisters-at-arms who can understand their experiences. The bonding and loyalty that comes with sharing experiences enables and encourages people to return as relationships with each other and Spirit evolve and strengthen.