



A Pioneer Rose Grows in the Garden

Wellness and Resilience Building for Female Veterans

Total Life Fitness Reintegration Retreat
October 4-6, 2019
The Rose Haven Center of Healing

Washington, NC—Nestled on the gently lapping Pamlico River within North Carolina’s Inner Banks, Pamlico Rose welcomed seven female Veterans to its inaugural three-day Total Life Fitness (TLF) Reintegration Retreat held October 4–6, 2019 at the nonprofit’s Rose Haven Center of Healing in Washington, NC. The retreat promoted wellness and resilience to help ease transition and reintegration issues that plague many Veterans after they have left the military and can linger for years, perhaps a lifetime. Female Veterans encounter similar post-service issues as their male counterparts, yet also face unique challenges that can impact their quality of life.

Dr. Allison Greene-Sands, Pamlico Rose Board member, touched on several of these issues in a recent speech at Rose Haven:

“Over the last two decades women in the military have been directly exposed to combat like never before. While it is only recently that women can serve in combat roles, they

were previously “attached” to combat units and placed indirect line of fire to serve as medics, military police, and convoy truck drivers, and to clear explosives with bomb-sniffing dogs, among other roles.

Women have been subject to the full array of physical and/or psychological harm; they are twice as likely as men to develop PTSD, and approximately one out of five women Veterans report military sexual trauma.

In the process of transition and reintegrating, women face addictions issues, they transition younger, and they are more vulnerable to divorce and/or a being a single parent. And yet about 60 percent of transition housing does not allow children or limits their age or number. Women have difficulty translating their military experience into civilian employment, which increases the risk and rate of unemployment and homelessness.

Female vets are now the fastest growing segment of the homeless population. And, while studies show that peer support is critical to successful readjustment, male vets have a much easier time connecting with other male service members.



Women constitute less than 15% of the Active Duty population, and thus struggle to find support networks of female service members who can relate to their military experience or, due to their experiences, choose not to self-identify as Veteran.

For any number of reasons, access, association with their past, retriggering, lack of female-centric services, and more, many female Veterans do not utilize VA services.

Not surprisingly, alcohol and drug abuse are strongly associated with exposure to violence in combat and military sexual trauma (MST).

Though more men than women Veterans are treated for substance abuse, the number of women Veterans admitted to treatment programs has been on the rise.

Female veterans are clearly an at-risk population that deserves and needs our support". [1]

Total Life Fitness (TLF) is a holistic and integrated approach to healthy living. Combining elements of the DoD's Total Force Fitness and the VA's Whole Life Initiative, TLF utilizes the concept of fitness to engage the Veteran's mind, body, and spirit while also building community. At the core of TLF is meaningful and persistent attention to daily activities and events that incorporate healthy eating, movement and exercise, anxiety/stress management, social connectedness, creative expression, mindfulness, and self-transcendence—all building resilience to overcome the effects of trauma and an uncertain future.

"Fitness is always associated with someone's physical condition," said Dr. Robert Greene Sands, TLF course director and Pamlico Rose CEO. "Especially in the military. But

total fitness is a concept that can apply to whole health just as easily." Sands, an anthropologist, continues, "Veterans bring with them attention to structure, planning and operation, all necessary for execution. Helped by this background, TLF is achieved by performance, working daily with resolve on skills in a variety of life domains that can help manage the effects of past experiences while building a resilience to the unpredictability of life."

The retreat kicked off bright and early on Friday morning, October 4th. Participants introduced themselves to each other and the retreat staff as all sat around the Council Ring in the healing gardens at Rose Haven, just three blocks from the waterfront. The Council Ring is a Native American symbol of equality and community building. For many female Veterans, self-identifying and engaging other Veterans in a support network can be a struggle.

The retreat opened with the tentative first steps of community building. That initial sense of belonging strengthened as familiarity and trust grew through many of the sessions, in their free time during the day, or in evening discussions.

Personal stories, some featuring trauma, or the effects of trauma, found willing listeners in retreat goers and staff, and often those experiences provided connections to aspects of wellness and resilience.

The weekend included multiple sessions on developing behavioral skills, such as anxiety management and mindfulness that are critical to easing anxiety and stress. A session on Veterans starting or returning to college offered suggestions to ease Veteran reintegration into the classroom.

[1] Excerpts from a speech given by Dr. Allison Greene-Sands at the Rose Haven ribbon-cutting, November 3, 2017, Washington, NC



shopping or meal planning and preparation. That can translate into poor nutrition adversely affecting health, as well as anxiety and stress over unhealthy eating habits, impacting wellness and lowering resilience.

The nutrition component of the retreat provides the participants with research-based recommendations on food choices that optimize health, with practical guidance on cooking and shopping to support healthy food choices,” added Sands.

Laura Sands gave lessons on the importance of protein, healthy grains and fruits and vegetables in the diet. Each session was accompanied by meal preparation practice by the Veterans, and of course, at the end, appreciative meal consumption by all.

Daily sessions included early morning yoga on the waterfront, afternoon group walks on the promenade, instruction on nutrition/ meal preparation/ cooking, and creative expression sessions that provided an opportunity to apply those same behavioral skills and model possible TLF activities to engage participants on the post-retreat road to wellness.

Retreat psychologist and Air Force Veteran Dr. Nate Galbreath explained how “Veterans have seen and experienced things that few people have. Sometimes that takes a toll on resilience. *Stress management is a great way to naturally activate one’s innate ability to overcome challenges. Sometimes we forget how helpful a deep breath, a few quiet moments, and a walk can be.*”

In addition to sessions at the nearby waterfront, the retreat featured activities in Washington’s Historic District and Main Street. Participants and staff traveled together between sessions on foot, offering opportunity for creating connections and mindful walking.

“In walking, running or even gardening,” added Dr. Robert Greene Sands, “mindfulness is enhanced as movement provides access to a more varied, richer and enjoyable sensory experiences that draws the person away from stress or anxiety in each step taken, or in a weed pulled or flower planted.”

Two retreat-long activities certainly exemplified the holistic nature of TLF. Healthy eating and creative expression touched on body and mind while both activities strengthened group cohesion and helped build community.

Proper nutrition is one of the eight primary planks of TLF and key to building and maintaining resilience. “Diet plays a large role in preventing disease and improving quality of life,” explained retreat nutritionist Laura Sands. Since many female Veterans are single parents, working a full-time job and raising a family leaves little time for





Two fifty-gallon rain barrels provided a weekend full of opportunities for creative expression by participants. Veterans worked individually and with others, guided by the retreat’s art therapist, Danielle Braxton, to transform the barrels into a living canvas filled with color, shapes, symbols and meaning for the Veteran artists. Not all were confident artists at the beginning, but over the course of the sessions, their anxiety over their skill or ability to express their feelings diminished.

“The expressive art sessions allowed the participants to express themselves as women and unique individuals,” said Braxton.



On the second day of art, the group chose a name—Pioneer Rose—then created a garden sign with their “logo” that now identifies the rose they planted to commemorate their experience. Braxton added, “The sessions also provided an opportunity for the women to work together as a group and create pieces of art that serve as lasting reminders of their bond and their time at the retreat as the very first cohort.”

A cookout at the Gardens on Saturday evening brought Veterans, staff and volunteers together. Following a Sunday morning session of yoga, preparing and cooking flapjacks, and work on anxiety management, the retreat closed with lunch and parting thoughts on the path forward.

“TLF implies more than attention to specific activities, such as exercise or diet,” said Dr. Allison Greene-Sands, retreat volunteer and Pamlico Rose board member. “If used right, this approach can help one plan healthy living into their lifestyle.”

Following the retreat, a private Facebook page was created for Veterans and staff, extending the opportunity for personal growth and fostering the community of Veterans started at the retreat.

Reminiscing on her time spent at the retreat, Kaitlyn O’Donnell, Pamlico Rose AmeriCorps/VISTA member said, “I think the key reason that the retreat was so well received by the participants and staff was the mutual respect we shared. The staff members have expertise in various areas, but they were quick to acknowledge that it is the participants who are the experts on their journeys and military service.”



Offered one Veteran on the weekend experience, “The retreat touched bases on critical aspects of daily living, health, wellness, nutrition, mental health, higher education and I think the most critical was the support system/ network. We developed friendships and a support system!”

Another participant reviewed her experience a week after the retreat ended and she had a chance to reflect about her experience saying, *“It was intense and exhausting at the same time but in a good way. I have been boasting about this experience to my female colleagues. It was enriching, informative and enjoyed the discussions and camaraderie.”*

Pamlico Rose anticipates offering further TLF retreats in 2020.

The pilot retreat was funded by donations and community businesses contributed to the success of the retreat through donating or discounting services including lodging, meeting space, instruction and food.

About Pamlico Rose and Rose Haven Center of Healing: Pamlico Rose is 501 (c)(3) non-profit that advances wellness and resilience programs to aid female Veterans as they transition from the military and reintegrate into civilian life. Tucked in the historic district of Washington, NC, and stretching over half a city block, the Rose Haven Center of Healing is a dedicated facility for two primary efforts, a three-month residential program for female Veterans in recovery and a series of TLF multiday reintegration retreats when the residential program is not in session. The Center features an 1892 farmhouse, adjacent barn and a healing landscape of produce and meditation gardens. The Gardens will be maintained by Pamlico Rose staff and residents/retreat participants. Rose Haven will also be available to local Veterans and the larger community.

For further information on Pamlico Rose and Rose Haven Center of Healing, contact: Robert Greene Sands, Pamlico Rose CEO, robert@pamlicorose.org or Kaitlyn O’Donnell, Pamlico Rose Community Resource Associate, kaitlyn@pamlicorose.org

