

Military Wives Retreat offers respite amid challenges of life

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SOPHIA, N.C.—Saluting “the sons and daughters of America” serving in the U.S. Armed Forces, Mary Gray said she is compelled to minister to military wives and families as they each “share their loved one with the world.”



Mary Gray, a military wife and mom, has led Bible studies each year at WMU North Carolina’s annual Military Wives Retreat. She said she seeks to provide “spiritual food from God’s Word” to encourage and equip retreat participants as they return to the challenges of daily life. (WMU photo by Pam Henderson)

One practical expression of Gray’s commitment is her involvement in the annual Military Wives Retreat hosted by Woman’s Missionary Union of

North Carolina.

The sixth annual retreat, which involved 21 military wives and a team of 13 volunteers, was held in mid-August at Camp Mundo Vista near Sophia, N.C. Attendance was less than half of recent years due to the coronavirus crisis.

Gray, whose husband and two of her sons have served in the military, personally relates to the daily needs and challenges faced by other military wives and mothers. Serving all six years as the retreat's keynote Bible teacher, she said she seeks to provide "spiritual food from God's word that they can take back with them to give them the strength and the comfort and the power and the peace that they need when they return."

Explaining that "every year, I have to really pray hard about what it is that will reach these particular women at this particular time," Gray said, "This year, God laid it on my heart to really talk about the power we have in prayer."

Many military wives "are dealing with some major challenges, because they're caregivers to some of our military who have been wounded, either emotionally, physically, one way or another, that are struggling," she said. "When you're a caregiver to someone like that, you need those breaks to take care of yourself and just focus on yourself."

Making valuable spiritual connections



Retreat participants attach prayer requests and personal reflections to a cross during the closing prayer service. Beca Lindhout, WMU of North Carolina's adult ministries consultant, encouraged the military wives to bring their burdens to Christ in such areas as stress, life circumstances, relationships, career and children. "Lay down that burden," she urged. "If you are weary today, come to Him. Let Him carry it." (WMU photo by Trennis Henderson)

Stephanie Trost, who has attended five of the six annual retreats, is among participants who are deeply appreciative of the event's ministry focus. The one retreat she missed was when her husband had his leg amputated at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center four years after being shot multiple times during an attack in Afghanistan.

Noting that her husband was a 32-year Army veteran, she said his severe injuries and long-term recovery and rehabilitation caused "a major, major change for us" that led to several "really dark years for us." Following her husband's initial injuries, she gave up her career as a bank vice president

to focus on his physical and emotional needs.

For Trost, the Military Wives Retreat provides a much-needed respite as she and her husband cope with daily challenges. Affirming that she “fell in love with the ladies that run this retreat,” Trost said: “They are just the sweetest, kindest, caring women I’ve met. They’ve stayed in touch with me after and continue to follow up with things that are going on with us at home.

“I’ve made great connections with the ladies when I come every year. The spiritual connection is so important because our lives are very intertwined with each other.”

Gray said the retreat is tailored specifically for military wives in order to “encourage them, love on them, let them know that they’re appreciated, let them know that what they’re doing—keeping the home fires burning and looking after the families—is a very important role.”

Change of pace encourages renewal

Describing the rural, rustic setting of Camp Mundo Vista as quiet and peaceful, Gray added: “They have free time if they want to take a nap, read a book, go to the pool. We have a lot of different activities. They make jewelry. They’re pampered. They’re loved on.”



Ziplining is among a variety of activities available for military wives and volunteers during WMU of North Carolina's annual Military Wives Retreat at Camp Mundo Vista. Margaret Harding, who helped establish the retreat, said the overall goal is for military wives to be "refreshed and renewed physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually." (WMU photo by Pam Henderson)

Whether spending a few moments in quiet prayer and reflection at Mundo Vista's scenic outdoor chapel or taking an adrenalin-fueled zipline ride through the woods, the three-day weekend definitely is a change of pace for harried military wives and moms.

Margaret Harding, who retired last fall as WMU of North Carolina's adult ministries consultant, was instrumental in helping establish the retreat. She said the overarching goal was for military wives to be "refreshed and renewed physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually."

Beca Lindhout, who succeeded Harding in that role, echoed her

perspective. Lindhout said retreat organizers and volunteers want each of the participants to realize that “they are beautiful, strong and loved by God, and in his strength, they can face the year ahead.

“They are a very selfless group of women who put themselves second so often, who are under an enormous amount of pressure that the rest of the world can’t understand when your husband is deployed, when he puts himself in harm’s way for our country,” Lindhout added. “It’s important to give them a place where they can refuel and have their cup filled.”

‘Very similar issues, very similar concerns’



Retreat participant Martha Knight works on a craft project as part of WMU of North Carolina’s 2020 Military Wives Retreat. Beca Lindhout, WMU of North Carolina’s adult ministries consultant, said the weekend retreat offers participants “a time to decompress and rest their souls.” (WMU photo by Pam Henderson)

Martha Knight is a U.S. Air Force veteran and mother of two young daughters. Her husband, who has served in the military for 20 years, is in Active Guard Reserve with the U.S. Army.

Attending her second Military Wives Retreat this year, Knight admitted she initially had second thoughts after she signed up for last year's retreat.

"I can't go. I can't leave my husband. I can't leave my kids. The house is going to burn down without me," she recalled thinking. However, "when I actually came out here for the first time, it was just the most peaceful, relaxing environment. It was awesome coming out here."

Describing her experience as "different than any retreat that I've ever been to before," she said, "Here, nobody wears a uniform. You don't have to worry about anybody's rank.

"We all have very similar issues, very similar concerns," she said. "With it just being the women, you can kind of put your hair down a little bit more and just relax a little bit more."

Noting that "we're on this beautiful mountaintop so you're totally secluded from life," Knight said, "You just feel so immersed with God out here. You just feel grateful to be alive, and you feel grateful that you are able to share this moment and experience with other military wives."

'We want them to feel loved'



Yvonne Deatherage, the volunteer coordinator for WMU of North Carolina's Military Wives Retreat, said the event's volunteers are passionate about serving the military wives each year. "We want them to feel pampered, we want them to feel loved, but we also want them to go away with knowing that as tough as things are, God is powerful and prayer is powerful," Deatherage affirmed. (WMU photo by Pam Henderson)

Yvonne Deatherage, the retreat's volunteer coordinator, said the entire weekend experience—lodging, meals, snacks and activities such as crafts, swimming and ziplining, as well as gift bags and door prizes—is provided at no cost to the military wives.

The retreat setting "is just a wonderful way for them to connect with other wives and know they're not alone," she explained. "We want them to feel pampered. We want them to feel loved. But we also want them to go away with knowing that as tough as things are, God is powerful and prayer is

powerful.

“Some of them will come with no spiritual background, but when they leave, they have such great testimonies of what the retreat meant to them, not only for physical relaxation, but to be spiritually renewed or to even know that God is truly there for them.”

Emphasizing the Military Wives Retreat “is a ministry that is needed immensely,” Deatherage said, “Every state that has a military base should set forth to do this, and WMU North Carolina will be more than willing to help anybody get started.

“The more we do it, the more we love it, and the more passionate we are about it,” she said. “It’s just an awesome experience. I always leave tired, but a good tired. It’s just a blessing.”