

Honoring Fellow Service Members

College Park VFW Post welcomes vets from Walter Reed

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GAITHERSBURG, Md. — Army Sgt. Kelly Keck arrived at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., last September, a week or two after he accidentally stepped on a land mine while serving as a medic in Afghanistan.

Keck, 35, lost his right leg below the knee and his left index, ring and pinky fingers in the explosion. After nearly a year of subsequent therapy and numerous surgeries, he has remained positive.

"For me, it's been pretty smooth most of the way," he said while sitting with his mother, Sandra Sharp, who was visiting him from their hometown of West Liberty, Ky. "Although I don't remember the first two months since I was under [medication]."

Keck has stayed in high spirits, he said, thanks to support from family, medical staff and even complete strangers. One such group of strangers was the Phillips-Kleiner Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 5627, which hosted dinner for Keck and six other wounded vets Saturday afternoon in College Park.

The post frequently hosts community events including veteran outreach but this was their first time hosting veterans from Walter Reed, said post commander Larry Williams.

"We just want to bring them down and show our appreciation for their services," said Williams, a West Hyattsville resident and Vietnam veteran. "It feels good when somebody comes to you and says 'thank you.' That's the least we could do."

Army Pfc. Renee Strine, of York, Pa., was one of the seven veterans — several of whom were accompanied by friends and family — who made the eight-mile bus trip from the nation's capital to enjoy steak, salmon and refreshments with their military brethren in College Park.

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Strine, 39, served in Iraq and has been at Walter Reed since May receiving treatment for depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.

"Things are getting better. Sometimes it's a slow go and some days are better than others," she said, beaming when describing her gratitude toward the day's hosts. "These guys that are thanking us actually paved the way, so we should be thanking them just as much."

Along with food, there was a live band on the backyard patio and plenty of stories and laughs to be had between the young and old veterans.

"You can talk about what you went through and what they went through," said Army Staff Sgt. Ben Schwengle, 31, who has been at Walter Reed for a month recovering from a broken left ankle suffered in Afghanistan. "They can relate because they've gone through it or worse."

Several VFW members said their goal for the day was to show the gratitude that wasn't always afforded in the past, particularly after the Vietnam War. The post hopes to host more veterans in the future, possibly as soon as this winter.

"We're going to do this over and over and over," said Chris Meyers of Rockville, the post's senior vice commander and a Marine Corps veteran of the 1983 conflicts in Grenada and Lebanon. "Someone has got to look out for these guys and do the right thing."