

'When you come back home, things are not the same'

Iraq veteran thanks Project Sanctuary for reconnecting his family

By VICKY GITS
Staff Writer

When Mike Lynch returned to Evergreen in 2007 from three years in Iraq, life back home was difficult.

He described a feeling of numbness and emptiness, compounded by a sense that family members "don't need you anymore."

Speaking to members of Evergreen Rotary on Friday at Evergreen Country Day School, Lynch described what happens when a soldier goes to war.

"You must say goodbye to your family not knowing if you will come home to everything you love. Then you travel thousands of miles to Iraq. It smells like burning trash and feces. ... You survive a grenade landing on your truck (it didn't explode). You see burned and mutilated bodies. Your best friend dies. You take lives. When you come back home, things are not the same."

As with many veterans of the Iraq war, Lynch's marriage suffered. He endured post-traumatic stress syndrome. He had relation-

AARON MALONE'S MOM, JULIE, and stepfather, Jack Ballard, of Conifer hold a family portrait of Laura, Logan, Ashlee and Aaron Malone at the Rotary Club of Evergreen meeting last Friday. The club donated \$3,000 for the Malone family to participate in a six-day Project Sanctuary retreat at Snow Mountain Ranch at the end of July.

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MIKE LYNCH, commander of American Legion Post 2001, spoke to Evergreen Rotary last Friday at Evergreen Country Day School.

ship and financial problems, he said.

The one thing that helped was Project Sanctuary, a nonprofit organization founded in Estes Park 20 years ago as a support system for soldiers and their families.

The organization was created to address the high rate of suicide, divorce, abuse and neglect that are associated with war veterans and families, said Kara Pappas, a Project Sanctuary spokesperson.

Based in Granby, Project Sanctuary provides a six-day retreat program and two years of follow-up contact for military

veterans and their families.

The group hosts retreats in Colorado at Snow Mountain and Winding River ranches in Grand County. Other locations are in upstate New York, Texas, California and Utah.

Lynch said he still suffers from PTSD, survivor's guilt and nightmares almost every night, but the trip to Snow Mountain Ranch in 2013 was a turning point.

The family received a key to a cabin for six days and then unplugged. No phone calls, e-mails, Facebook or Pinterest. No one had to worry about the everyday

routine. There were hiking, fishing, rafting and riding, and counseling sessions.

"We realized we weren't enjoying life and what it had to offer," Lynch said.

In a two-day relationship class, "we learned that we are different, that we think differently, and how to take the differences into account." Project Sanctuary helped connect him with an individual who was able to find him some life insurance, which had been difficult to get.

Lynch and his wife, Gillian, have 2-year-old twins and a 5-year-old.

He is a stay-at-home dad and serves as commander of American Legion Post 2001 in Evergreen.

Lynch said Project Sanctuary is capable of reconnecting broken families.

Julie Ballard of Conifer, owner of Beautiful Skin in Marshdale, has been a volunteer for Project Sanctuary for four years. Her son, Aaron, recently completed his eighth and final deployment after 20 years in the Navy, where he served in special operations as an explosives disposal expert.

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"They look like a beautiful family," Ballard said, showing a portrait of her son and his family. "But they have the usual problems."

The family plans to move back to Evergreen, and Aaron has accepted a job as a Navy Seal recruiter starting in September. Aaron and his wife, Laura, both graduated from Evergreen High School in the mid-'90s.

At Friday's meeting, Evergreen Rotary announced a \$3,000 donation to the family to attend a Project Sanctuary retreat this summer.

The nonprofit currently serves about 250 families a year, including 20 percent who are on active duty. It has a waiting list of 1,800 families. Of the hundreds of families served, 90 percent of Project Sanctuary families are still intact. There were nine years without a suicide, until a tragic death occurred recently. The group says 83 percent of funding goes directly to the mission.

Project Sanctuary is hosting a gala fund-raiser at Sports Authority Field at Mile High Stadium in Denver on May 21. Visit www.ProjectSanctuary.us for more information.