

# DIVIDE

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“A lot of healing happens up in the Eagle Caps,” Wheeler said.

## Pain management

Army veteran Luke Norton is one who helps his fellow vets manage pain. After serving from 1998-2005, which included a one-year tour in Afghanistan, he realized he could help other vets. He went to school and received degrees in sports medicine with exercise science concentrations.

“We’re not talking about medication. We’re trying to manage pain by realigning the spine and getting it to where it needs to be. We use mostly just stretches,” Norton said.

He noted while the military is well known for insisting on correct posture, “they put a heavy ‘rock’ on your back,” and troops often are sitting a lot, hunched over and doing other things that are hard on the spine. So Norton’s working to remedy the damage caused.

“We’re anatomically realigning the disks,” he said.

Most of the veterans aren’t seriously handicapped, though the camp can accommodate individuals with missing limbs.



Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain  
Veterans attending Divide Camp’s Health and Wellness Retreat pound elk sinew into a usable form for a bow-making class Thursday, June 24, 2021. From left are Bryan Kove, U.S. Army, Iraq, 2008-2009, and Clifford Cole, an Army combat medic in Iraq 2003-2004.

fighting for my country,’ and all this, but that’s not the case. But you’re fighting for survival and you’re fighting for your buddies to survive. I’m happy to be here to help these guys out. You know, the military beats us up and then we’re supposed to get out of the military and maintain our physical and mental health. That’s part of this: If I can get their physical health under control, it really helps mentally too.”

for whom their PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) is really fresh and they’re looking for ways to mitigate the symptoms of war. And they’re young enough, that if they find things — especially the outdoors — it’s proven, we see it happen, their lives change. The older vets — the Vietnam vets — many of them have been out (of the service) 50 years. Sure, they want to go hunting, they want to go fishing and

debriefing — which is all peer-driven — it’s more powerful and valuable to share things with people who ‘get it’ and who’ve experienced it. That’s why Vietnam vets are such amazing volunteers. I’ve had so many Vietnam vets tell me that helping these guys is the best thing that ever happened to them. The older ones serving the younger ones is powerful.”

## The vets

Army veteran Bryan Kove, who was in Iraq in 2008-2009, was on his second Health and Wellness Retreat last week.

“It gives a space for clarity,” he said. “Back home in the city, it’s really hard to work through the things that are working on my heart and mind left over from being overseas and coming back. There’s so many difficulties to face in that transition from soldier to citizen. It’s a work in progress. The Army tells you how to be a soldier, but they never tell you how to go back.”

Kove said he believes America should do more to help veterans transition to civilian life.

“I think there should be something, but I don’t think the Army is the one that’s going to be able to do it right,” he said. “There are so many cultures out

there that treat their warriors better and with more care than the U.S. does.”

Clifford Cole, who was a combat medic in the Army during the initial invasion of Iraq in

There’s even some good-natured rivalry between veterans of different branches. When a Marine Corps veteran told the branch of service in which he served, there erupted a chorus of “oo-rahhs.” The same went with Army veterans and their “hoo-ahs.”

The camp also attracts veterans’ families as volunteers, although “not nearly enough,” Wheeler said.

Volunteer Ramona Phillips observed, “Volunteerism is waning. ... This sort of touched my heart.” Her son, Shawn, served two tours in Iraq before one in Afghanistan.

“When my son, Shawn, came back from Iraq, he was Shawn,” she said.

“When he came back from Afghanistan, he was not. I think the biggest thing he did that I’m the proudest of was admitting he had the PTSD. I have seen so many healings with people up here. I see him with a big smile; he just loves it up here. That’s the one thing you can’t say enough about is the healing that takes place up here. ... It’s his story, but he came back



Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

Divide Camp volunteer Jim Soares, of Wallowa, explains the use of elk sinew and the proper wood during a class on bow making Thursday, June 24, 2021, for veterans at the camp’s Health and Wellness Retreat.

Most of the injuries are to backs and shoulders.

Norton has found that in just a short time, most vets say they’re feeling better.

“What I’ve heard from these guys is that their pain, even after the first day” is easing, he said.

Norton said his contribution is not unlike the support he gave — and received — while overseas.

“There were groups of guys like this who were my support system and I was their support system and we just got through it together,” he said. “You get over there and, I’m

## Who the camp helps

Wheeler said the veterans Divide Camp is there for are those who served post-9/11. She said some local folks have accused Divide Camp of being prejudiced and discriminatory against pre-9/11 vets.

“Like I told them, there’s nothing we do here that you couldn’t do if you wanted to help a Vietnam vet,” she said.

The older vets, Wheeler said, “have pretty much established their coping mechanisms. We’re working with a lot of people

all the things these guys do, but we’re not going to change them.”

However, she said, the older veterans still can reap a reward by volunteering at the camp.

“Serving other vets, that changes them,” she said.

## Peer counseling

Veterans helping each other is a key component of healing, Wheeler said, with the reestablishment of the camaraderie they experienced in the military. As a result, the camp isn’t open to the families of vets.

“We focus on (the veterans) and their struggles, partly because when they get together like this, they do amazing peer counseling and they don’t even know it,” she said. “But whether they’re sitting around or having lunch or whatever, you hear these conversations and things like, ‘Ah, I didn’t know you were there. I was there this year,’ and pretty soon they’re talking about their experiences, things they can’t share with a spouse. Out of my experience with



Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

Army veteran Jesse Palacios pounds elk sinew Thursday, June 24, 2021, for use in a longbow during a Divide Camp class on bow making. Palacios served two tours in Afghanistan and one in Iraq between 2004 and 2011.

2003-2004, definitely finds meeting fellow vets in a remote location to be healing.

“I could talk for an hour,” he said. “By meeting people, it’s helped me feel better and to get away from the stress of the city and being with the other dudes. The camaraderie, everybody’s hanging out, everybody’s getting along, it’s great.”

and it took him awhile to admit there was a problem and to seek help. He got counseling ... the whole family had counseling, but this was huge for him.”

Wheeler agreed.

“When you listen to those guys laughing — for some of them, they haven’t really laughed since they left for war, and now they’re just happy,” she said.



Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

Luke Norton, an Army veteran and Divide Camp volunteer, instructs Marine Corps veteran Li Hoang on stretching techniques Thursday, June 24, 2021, at the camp. Norton said stretching properly helps mitigate pain vets suffer from their time in the service.



Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

Divide Camp owner and executive director Julie Wheeler, left, stands in the camp’s main cabin Thursday, June 24, 2021, with one of her volunteers, Ramona Phillips. The two were there June 20-26 for Divide Camp’s second Health and Wellness Retreat for veterans.

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