



Founder, president and CEO of Semper Fi Fund, Karen Guenther, center, gathers with members of the Semper Fi Fund staff in their office at MCB Camp Pendleton, Calif., during the organization's early years. Guenther attributes much of the organization's success to the strength and resiliency of the military spouses that built the fund into a \$187 million charity.

“Keeping Up With the Terrain” Over 15 Years, Semper Fi Fund Founders Adapt Mission as Needs Evolve

By Sara W. Bock • Photos courtesy of Semper Fi Fund

In June 2007, Gunnery Sergeant Davey Lind was recovering in a hospital bed in Bethesda, Md., dealing with the reality that his life would be changed forever. During his third deployment to Iraq, his vehicle had struck an improvised explosive device, and the blast severed both of his legs from the knee down.

His wife, Lisa, took a leave of absence from work and was by his side for the entirety of his 45-day stay, but their four children remained home at Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, Calif., where Lind was assigned to 1st Reconnaissance Battalion. The separation took a toll on the entire family, he recalled with raw emotion in his voice more than a decade later.

And that's when Semper Fi Fund—a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing immediate financial assistance and lifetime support to combat wounded, critically ill and catastrophically injured servicemembers—stepped in and provided the funds for his children to travel twice from California to Bethesda and back. It was a gesture that Lind

says was crucial to his family's stability as he recovered and attempted to find a new normal.

“Hey, Dad is down but he's not out. We're going to be OK, and it's going to take me a while to get back up on my feet—but once I do get back up on my feet, I'm not going to be deploying anymore. Be patient, let me get better and we'll get through this,” Lind, now a retired master sergeant, recalls telling his children.

By alleviating many of the stressors that easily could have overwhelmed Lind during that time, the support provided by the fund allowed him to focus solely on his recovery—and it worked. Just two months after his injury, he took his first steps on prosthetic legs.

“I am largely successful because at a very crucial time I had a strong foundation of support,” said Lind.

During his hospitalization, Semper Fi Fund helped the family pay their bills, gave them meal vouchers and ensured that his wife, who was now taking on a new role as caregiver, had the support she needed. And nearly 12 years after his injury,



Using adaptive ski gear, a double amputee enjoys the thrill of adventure alongside his service dog. Semper Fi Fund pairs wounded, ill and injured servicemembers with well-trained dogs to assist in their transition to civilian life, as well as provides sports and integrative wellness programs that allow them to participate in the physical activities they enjoyed prior to their injuries.

he says the organization continues to honor their commitment to “lifetime support.” The Semper Fi Fund staff, he says, is like family to him. An avid golfer, he’s even had the opportunity to give back by raising money for the fund at golf tournaments and takes advantage of every opportunity he can to share the Semper Fi Fund story.

The support network that proved to be vitally important during Lind’s recovery had come to life just a few years earlier when a group of Marine wives gathered around Karen Guenther’s kitchen table in the San Luis Rey housing community on MCB Camp Pendleton.

The wives had become aware of a growing need within their Marine community. Marines with catastrophic injuries from the initial invasion of Iraq were being medevacked to Naval Hospital Camp Pendleton in 2003, and the women—whose husbands also were deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom—had an up-close and personal view of the severity the injuries sustained by the Marines, and also of the effect on the family members who sat at their bedsides as they recovered.

Guenther, a registered nurse who worked in the ICU, had mobilized a group of fellow spouses from 1st Marine Division at Camp Pendleton, who she’d come to know through volunteering on base in various capacities.

“I just pulled together friends that I had volunteered with to greet the medevacs and meet with the families,” recalled Guenther. “We thought that was all we were going to do—to be there to support the families as their spouse came home.”

Among her earliest teammates were Sondria Saylor, who was with her from day one, and Wendy Lethin, who joined in 2004. Both continue to serve as members of Semper Fi Fund’s executive team.

“It was just kind of meant to be, because Karen was there, she saw the need and we were all friends who said, ‘What can we do to help?’ ” said Saylor, Semper Fi Fund’s Vice President for Case Management West. “It’s pretty amazing and I think it just shows you what you can do if your heart is in it.”

As the wounded Marines and Sailors continued to arrive at Camp Pendleton and she spent time with their family members, Guenther became keenly aware of the financial, emotional and logistical challenges they faced as they found themselves

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Above: MSgt Davey Lind, USMC (Ret), with his young son. In 2007, as MSgt Lind recovered from severe injuries from an IED in Iraq, he said Semper Fi Fund provided the support that his family needed.

Left: A recovering servicemember takes a break to spend time with his daughter during the 2013 Marine Corps Trials at MCB Camp Pendleton, Calif., a qualifier for the Department of Defense Warrior Games.





Above: Families of recovering servicemembers, like the one pictured here, benefit from Semper Fi Fund's assistance during the challenging recovery period and beyond. From financial assistance to caregiver retreats and summer camps for children, the impact a servicemember's injuries have on the family unit is not overlooked by the organization.



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living a reality they never expected or planned for.

She and her fellow volunteers wanted to do more, so they began to assemble welcome bags for the families, containing simple donated items like calling cards, toothbrushes and toiletries. They reached out to local churches and community organizations asking for support—and the responses they received surpassed their expectations.

Soon, they were booking flights and hotel rooms for families who hadn’t been able to travel to Camp Pendleton due to the cost of travel and providing them with meals and other necessities.

Then there was a moment that Guenther considers pivotal. Her nurse supervisor at Naval Hospital Camp Pendleton was aware of her group’s efforts and came to her for help. A young Marine who had returned home from Iraq a quadriplegic needed an adaptive van; since he had left the hospital, his wife had been attempting to lift him in and out of the family’s SUV.

“OK, we have some important work to do,” Guenther remembers saying to herself after hearing their story. She contacted retired Colonel Jack Kelley, who was involved with a local nonprofit, San Diego Nice Guys. “Jack, I need a van,” she told him.

After two weeks and with the help of generous donors, they delivered a brand-new, fully adaptive van to the family.

“That just went viral,” Guenther recalled. “After that, hospitals around the country started calling us with different needs and requests.”

The kitchen table meetings had evolved from packing gift bags to brainstorming ways to meet needs they hadn’t known would exist. They essentially were venturing into uncharted territory and they were determined to do their part to ensure that the past didn’t repeat itself.

“We all saw what happened with the Vietnam veterans, and our team has just pledged that we’ll make sure as much as we can that that does not happen to this generation of military members,” said Guenther.

Looking back today from the helm of an organization that has provided more than \$187 million in assistance and has expanded its reach

Semper Fi Fund staff and volunteers share their mission at the Modern Day Marine Expo at MCB Quantico, Va., in September 2018. The fund relies on donations to provide immediate assistance and lifetime support to America’s wounded, ill and injured servicemembers.



from only Marines and Sailors to servicemembers of all branches of the Armed Forces, Guenther, Semper Fi Fund's President & CEO, credits her team—still made up largely of military spouses located all over the globe—with Semper Fi Fund's remarkable success.

"I wish I could say I had this wonderful grand vision, but I didn't," said Guenther of the fund's early days. "The war started, Camp Pendleton was a ghost town, and we saw needs that needed to be addressed. We really truly thought the war would be over soon."

With the relatively short length of Operation Desert Storm as their only real frame of reference, Guenther, Lethin and Saylor never imagined that Marines would remain engaged in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan for more than a decade.

Guenther took a leave of absence from her nursing job, certain she would return within a year. But as time went by, she and her team became even more aware that the need for support would be ongoing and also would evolve as the first wave of wounded Marines left the hospital and headed home, where they would face new challenges. With zero experience in nonprofit management, Guenther read books like "Nonprofit Kit for Dummies" to gain the basic knowledge she needed to move their efforts forward.

From the very beginning, Guenther was insistent that she and her team do the right things for the right reasons.

"We're doing important work, but we also make sure that we're doing things the right way," said Guenther, who said that not long after they first started showing up at the hospitals, people began handing her big checks. "We made a commitment to that early on when we first started this. We go to great lengths to do things right and make sure that the focus stays on that donor and their confidence. It's sacred to us that they believed in us enough to give us even \$10, that we have to manage that properly and we take that very seriously."

In May 2004, Injured Marine Semper Fi Fund—which later would be shortened to just "Semper Fi Fund"—was officially incorporated and given 501(c) 3 status as a national nonprofit, dedicated to providing financial assistance and quality of life solutions to wounded, ill and injured Marines and Sailors and their families.

"The first times just helping—seeing relief on the families' faces or hearing a father call who was so upset that he couldn't take his son home because they didn't have a ramp to get into the house, and just saying, 'Don't worry, we've got you. We'll get someone to do the ramp, and don't worry about it,'" said Lethin, now Vice President for Community Outreach, of the experiences that impacted her during Semper Fi Fund's early days.

At every turn, said Guenther, people whose guidance they needed—a lawyer, a CPA and others—arrived in their path to help them along the way. She considers it divine intervention. As word

Veterans of "Alpha" Battery, 1st Battalion, 14th Marine Regiment gather in Granby, Colo., for a unit reunion sponsored by Semper Fi Fund. Reunions are one of the many ways the fund supports combat veterans by allowing them to "reconnect, remember and recover together."

spread about their work, the team expanded their efforts outside of Southern California and donations poured in from across the country.

"I can remember going and checking the mail, and on a good day there would be three or five checks in there and we were really excited," said Saylor.

By the end of its first year as an incorporated nonprofit, the fund had raised more than \$5 million.

"We were really just so focused on our jobs and on the mission and helping them. We truly had our nose to the ground, saw the need and really kept going just one day at a time—and we turned around and we were pretty big!" said Susan Rocco, who joined Semper Fi Fund's efforts in 2005 and today is Vice President for Case Management East, overseeing efforts to support wounded, ill and injured servicemembers and their families who are located east of the Mississippi River.

As Semper Fi Fund grew and they spent more time with recovering servicemembers and their families, they developed an even greater appreciation for those they were serving. Each has had moments they'll never forget. For Saylor, it was a visit with severely burned Marines in the burn unit at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio. She cried the entire flight back to San Diego, she said, and it's an experience she still thinks about often. Rocco recalled that during the "busy years" at National Naval Medical Center Bethesda, there were dozens of Marine amputees arriving for treatment and recovery. In an effort to encourage them and their families, Semper Fi Fund brought back amputees who had been injured several years prior.

"You can run a marathon in two years. You can have a more enriched life in just a little while," Rocco recalled the amputees saying to the newly injured. "I'll never forget crying. It's just such a beautiful thing because their whole faces changed, and their parents and their spouses who were sitting at the bedside said, 'Oh my gosh, look at this man walking in my room who is also a double amputee, and look what he's doing now.' It's just a beautiful moment ... and these are the things we carry with us each day when we do our jobs."

The team recognized early on that due to the nature of their lives as Marine Corps spouses, they would have to create a model for the Semper Fi Fund that would allow them to work remotely as they relocated due to military orders. They have retained a small office at Camp Pendleton, but the majority of Semper Fi Fund's staff, now about 140 members strong, works out of locations worldwide.

"We've got this talented team of military spouses that just make it work. There's no other option. We have to," said Guenther, emphasizing the resiliency and strength that they bring to the table. "This team doesn't say, 'No, this can't work.' This team says, 'Let's figure out how to do it.' I think that's the secret of our success."

And with staff members—and hundreds of dedicated volunteers—located on or near military installations worldwide, Guenther believes the

Right: A grateful couple stands outside their newly adaptive home made possible by Semper Fi Fund.

Below: During the early years of what was then "Injured Marine Semper Fi Fund," staff and volunteers gather at a race to raise awareness for their growing mission.



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From the left, Capt Marc Tucker, USMC (Ret); Madeline Manzanet; Cpl Larry Bailey, USMC (Ret); and Vanessa Keane attend the Marine Corps Cryptologic Association's 2018 reunion dinner, benefiting Semper Fi Fund. Tucker and Bailey were invited to attend and speak about how the Semper Fi Fund has helped them through their recovery, and Manzanet and Keane are members of the fund's community outreach and events team.

Below: Recovering servicemembers benefit from Semper Fi Fund's Jinx McCain Horsemanship Program, which takes place at working cattle ranches. The program promotes camaraderie and individual achievement while imparting valuable skills.

distance between them is an asset to the mission of the organization. Case managers are on site at each of the nation's major military and VA hospitals, ensuring that no one who qualifies for and needs assistance slips through the cracks.

"Our ear is always to the ground and our staff are in the units, so we have a very unique positioning to be very keenly aware. We don't have to spend millions of dollars on studies because we live the life," said Guenther of one of the many benefits of remaining primarily staffed by military spouses. "I think that's really been a huge part of evolving our programs to make sure they're relevant, because if they're not, then we don't want to do them."



During its nearly 15 years of existence, Semper Fi Fund has established three major programs: servicemember and family support, transition and integrative wellness.

From injury and recovery to integration into the community and health therapies designed to improve "body, mind and spirit," each program offers a variety of support and resources to help ensure the fund's commitment to lifetime support for the entire family.

Offering services like retreats for caregivers, a Semper Fi Fund Kids Camp in numerous locations each summer, and the Tim and Sandy Day Canine Companions Program, which launched in 2012 to provide well-trained service dogs to the injured and critically ill, the fund's reach has grown far beyond the initial bedside financial support. The Jinx McCain Horsemanship Program also was established in 2012 and offers a riding program designed to build confidence, and Semper Fi Fund continues to provide assistance in housing, transportation and adaptive equipment.

For transitioning servicemembers, the Semper Fi Fund's Veteran to Veteran (V2V) program trains veterans to help their peers transition from active-duty to civilian life. A variety of apprenticeship programs allow recovering servicemembers to learn new skills and trades, and unit reunions sponsored by the fund allow units to reconnect and help each other recover.

Since 2006, Team Semper Fi has promoted "recovery through sport," and its members, all of whom endured life changing injuries, critical illnesses, traumatic brain injury (TBI) or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), train for and compete in



Above: Semper Fi Fund staff members Karen Hetherington and Helen Toolan visit with CPT Pat Horan, USA (Ret) and Patty Horan during a "Military Appreciation Monday" event at the Old Brogue in Great Falls, Va., September 2018. The fund's staff, volunteers and recovering service-members consider themselves a "family" and are proud of the friendships they have formed.

triathlons, marathons, races, competitive sports and other athletic events. The fund also promotes wellness by offering counseling, specialized equipment and a NeuroFitness program.

As soon as they had the resources to do so in 2012, Semper Fi Fund started "America's Fund" and opened assistance to all service branches. It was a natural evolution of their mission, said Guenther, and was something they had wanted to do for years as they watched Marines recover alongside servicemembers from other branches, particularly the Army.

Last year, with the launch of the Lance Corporal Parsons Welcome Home Fund for Vietnam Veterans, Semper Fi Fund extended its reach beyond post-9/11 veterans to include catastrophically combat-injured Vietnam veterans who weren't given the assistance and support they needed and deserved when they returned home from war. The program's inception was made possible by the support of Bob Parsons, a Vietnam War Marine veteran who founded GoDaddy.com and has been a longtime



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supporter of Semper Fi Fund, donating \$51 million over the past seven years, the majority of which was part of a matching campaign that brought in a total of \$100 million.

While Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom are over, catastrophically wounded servicemembers continue to arrive home from locations all over the world, said Guenther, with injuries from training accidents and combat operations.

"We still have medevacs coming back, and it's not always in the news," said Rocco. "We still get cases from all over the country, from [veteran] centers, from servicemembers that deployed maybe three or four times and just now are seeking care for their post-traumatic stress."

Moving forward, the women of Semper Fi Fund will continue to evolve and adapt their programs to meet ever-changing needs as they arise.

"I think we reinvent ourselves to keep up with the terrain that's in front of us," said Guenther.

And despite tremendous growth and a list of more than 22,000 servicemembers helped, they haven't lost sight of where they came from and remain focused on maintaining individual relationships.

MSgt Davey Lind's son recently graduated from boot camp at Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego, following in his father's footsteps and earning the title "Marine." Lind proudly texted photos from the graduation to family and close friends, including Wendy Lethin and Sondria Saylor, who after all these years, have remained an integral part of his life.

"They are family," he said.

Semper Fi Fund surely is a testament to the strength and determination of military spouses, but its founders insist that the real fortitude is found among those they serve.

"I'm just in awe of our caregivers, and the bravery and strength of our servicemembers. They don't give up, and I think that's something that impacts all of our staff and volunteers," said Guenther. "We're so blessed that we get to see this every day. We watch heroes and heroic acts every single day. We don't have to go to the movies or read about them in books. They're right in front of us... They have this amazing resolve to make this next chapter of their life the best that it can be." 🇺🇸

Karen Guenther and her daughter Brooke, left, spend time with LCpl Chuck Sketch, USMC (Ret), a double amputee who also is blind, and his father, Roger Sketch, during the Warrior Games in Colorado Springs, Colo., in 2010.