

## Above and beyond the call of duty

Health club owner offers free memberships to military wives, mothers and women who serve.

BY RHODA FUKUSHIMA

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Audrey Hoglund Ross of Monticello grew up with a special appreciation for the military.

Her uncle died in World War II, just after the Battle of the Bulge. Her father was in the Seabees during the same war. Her paternal grandparents rode in Memorial Day parades. Her sister was born on the sixth anniversary of her uncle's death. Her parents donated land for the VFW building in Monticello.

In 2004, a year after opening two women-only gyms in the northern metro, Hoglund Ross turned her attention to what she could do for troops and their families.

"I was taking a shower one morning and got the answer," she says.

The "answer" was to offer free memberships to wives of deployed military personnel and later, to their mothers. Now, she's widening the circle to include women returning from active duty, a move she hopes will catch on nationwide.

"That is what we're supposed to do," Hoglund Ross says. "We're supposed to help each other in this world."

After the epiphany in the shower, Hoglund Ross asked several other Ladies Workout Express gyms in Minnesota if they'd be interested in offering the same promotion. They were. They did.

A year later, trainers at Fort Snelling asked Hoglund Ross if she could arrange something similar for military wives in Wisconsin, North Dakota, South Dakota and Iowa. She posted the query on the chain's bulletin board and waited for reactions from fellow club owners.

"I got responses from the five-state area and beyond," Hoglund

Ross says. "It was overwhelming."

As the idea caught on nationally, Hoglund Ross added troops' mothers to the mix.

In this promotion, wives and mothers of military personnel get free memberships for the duration of their loved ones' deployment. Normally, the gym fees are a \$100 down payment and \$39 per month.

Hoglund Ross estimates 50 women signed up for the program at her New Brighton club and one in Columbia Heights, which she recently closed.



Jennifer Christy of Mounds View chats with others during a workout at Ladies Workout Express. (RICHARD MARSHALL, Pioneer Press)

## APPRECIATION

Connie Maetzold of Arden Hills had been going to Hoglund Ross' club for a few years before signing up for the program. Her husband, a major in the U.S. Army Reserve, was called to active duty in May 2007.

"It really is a gift," Maetzold says. "As a military spouse, you feel you sacrifice a lot. (This) allows me to continue to do what I have been doing and not have to sacrifice that."

Jennifer Christy of Mounds View joined Hoglund Ross' club after her husband was deployed in June 2004.

"It made me feel appreciated," Christy says. "There is a lot of emphasis on the soldiers - which there should be - but there are people left at home who have to go through their daily routine. Sometimes you feel forgotten."

Christy's goal was to get in shape and lose weight. She dropped 20 pounds and two pants sizes.

Her husband returned in September 2005, and they had a baby a year later. Now Christy goes as a regular member.

## SUPPORT

Recently, Hoglund Ross began offering free memberships to returning female veterans. She hopes the exercise will help them manage post-traumatic stress disorder, which often affects returning troops.

Exercise can help people with PTSD by reducing their physical tension, boosting their sense of well-being, self-esteem and personal control and temporarily distracting them from traumatic memories and emotions, says Linda Van Egeren, staff psychologist and coordinator of military sexual trauma services at the Minneapolis VA Hospital.

In addition, the health club setting can offer a structured way of being with others without the social demands, Van Egeren says.

"With PTSD, there is a tendency to want to withdraw," Van Egeren says. "(At the gym) you're doing things together. It can help you start to feel like your old self, but it doesn't have the same kind of demands."

The women-only environment also can be helpful for returning veterans who experienced sexual trauma involving men, she says.

Hoglund Ross hopes the idea of businesses offering to help troops spreads beyond the gym.

"Theaters - why can't they have one afternoon where a (military) spouse and the kids come in for a movie?" she says. "I have visions of people helping other people."

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