

Missionaries in Alaska Bring Christ-Centered Community to Military Service Members

Bob and Stephanie Caudle are giving back to members of the U.S. military stationed in Anchorage, Alaska, through faith-infused outreach, fellowship and hospitality. The heart of the couple's ministry is meeting urgent needs of young U.S. service members at Fort Elmendorf-Richardson.

The Caudles are directors of the Homestead, a Cadence International hospitality house offering military men, women and families a place to connect, find family-like support and grow in their faith.

The Caudles say their move from health insurance to Samaritan Ministries healthcare sharing is one of the reasons they can focus on this important work. The financial savings they experienced through Samaritan Ministries helps the Caudles continue to pursue their ministry.

They open their home as a place for people to gather, a place to hold Bible studies and an opportunity to conduct one-on-one mentorship.

"We try to bring people who are hurting into a Christ-centered community," Bob says.

The many challenges confronting members of the military drew the Caudles to this ministry. They meet people from many different backgrounds; some are exploring Christianity and questioning the existence of God, and some have grown up in the faith. The one constant that unites these individuals is a need for family and community—a need to belong. Such human needs are often heightened by homesickness, failing marriages, thoughts of suicide and other emotional struggles brought

about by the high-stress military life.

"They're hungry," Bob said. "Military life creates significant need and much more potential for ministry to address those needs."

Service members on the base are experiencing their very first tour of duty, and many are only just coming to grips with the realization that going home is not an option—that this isn't just another job. This is their whole life for the foreseeable future.

"They're far away from home trying to figure out how to live life as an adult and in a strange place," Stephanie said.

"Many of them are 18-year-olds that have been thrust into very highly responsible positions with multimillion-dollar pieces of equipment," Bob adds.

The Caudles also minister to young couples, many of whom have been married less than five years and have spent half of that time apart. "Because of the stresses involved, it's a tough world," Stephanie says. "You get married, move away from family and your spouse is deployed for a year."

The extremes of Alaska add to the difficulties that new service members face. At the peak of winter, residents see only four hours of daylight every day. Bob and Stephanie try to meet the needs brought on by the Alaskan environment by encouraging the young people in even the small things, like taking vitamin D to help guard against depression, a natural side effect of the continual darkness.

The troops who come from warmer states often don't know how to handle the cold, so the Caudles take them sledding, on solstice hikes, skiing—all ways that teach them to enjoy the arctic beauty. "[God] created Alaska," Stephanie says, "and Alaska is amazing."

“We had 20 of them show up in those kinds of conditions, standing outside all day in the snow and the cold,” Bob says. “They’re just lonely and want to be together.”

The Caudles’ life-on-life approach to ministry is not limited to Bible study and showing the beauty of God’s creation. The Caudles help the young men and women through the responsibilities that are often new to those living on their own for the first time: filing taxes, buying a new car and changing the oil. If Bob is in the middle of a building project at the house, he’ll invite some of them over to teach them things like drywalling and plumbing. These practical activities also present opportunities to share Jesus with them.

“They can really love on each other and be part of a community like a family,” Bob says. “You can bring them into a family, a home away from home, that gives them a place for security and spiritual mentoring that they wouldn’t get through just being on their own with their unit, and that is often not a wholesome community.” {eoa}

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