

OPERATION AT EASE

Nov 2015



A Brief History

Chris Stitcher had been thinking for some time about an appropriate way to thank members of the military who were deploying to Iraq and Afghanistan. Then, she realized that she lives where people want to vacation, and that's what she had to offer. She began to develop an idea for an inclusive getaway at St. James.

During a lunch in Southport, Stitcher invited Eleanor Colston and Jean Fiedler to sign on. Colston, at some point, came up with the name, Operation at Ease (OAE).

While the three friends discussed the next steps over breakfast at the Members Club, a gentleman at the next table overheard their conversation and wrote a check that provided seed money for OAE. That wonderful person is still a St. James resident.

The ladies met several times with the St. James Service Club (SJSC) for possible sponsorship, but they eventually decided that OAE would remain independent. The SJSC offered to help OAE raise funds once it became a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization, which happened in 2008.

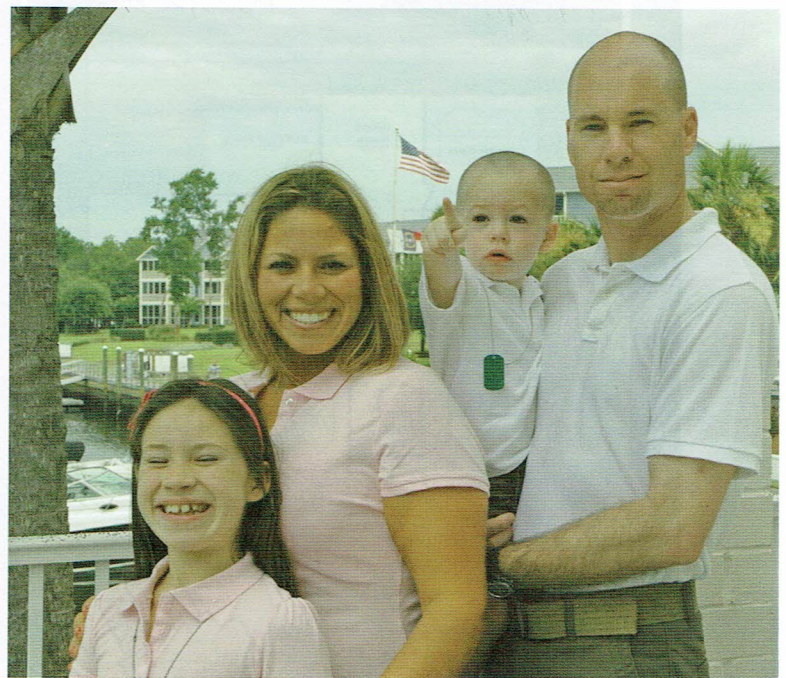
After trying with little success to attract families to St. James from Camp Lejeune, Stitcher asked Joe Kinzer, a retired U.S. Army Lt. General, to see if anyone at Fort Bragg would be interested in the program. By the end of that year, OAE had hosted 30 families, with an additional 36 wait-listed families enjoying their St. James vacations the following year.

OAE developed a cadre of volunteers to support the program, including people who donated their condos for use by the families. The original OAE Board of Directors consisted of Stitcher, Colston, Fiedler, Cheryl McGuire, Chuck Akstin, Mike Kirsche and Ann Newton.

Today, in addition to the seven-member board, OAE is staffed with more than 120 volunteers and has developed a program that supports approximately 50 family visits each year.

This program would not be possible without the continuing strong support of the patriotic St. James community. The payback is the joy and appreciation of the families, as expressed in short notes such as the following, written last June:

“Thank you OAE for a fabulous weekend! Words cannot express our gratitude for each and every one of you. From driving into the community for the first time and seeing the mailboxes adorned with blue ribbons and flags, right down to how perfectly this trip was organized, our hearts have been touched. Weekends like this are few and far between, and this was just perfect. Thank you for making Lily’s first beach trip perfect! She didn’t want to go home. Your generosity will never be forgotten.”



Submitted by Don Hill for the OAE Board