

Strong bonds: Two-day retreat draws couples close

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By **Crystal Lewis Brown**



Photo credit **Crystal Lewis Brown, Fort Jackson Leader**

Chaplain (Maj.) James Smith speaks to a group during the 171st Infantry Brigade Strong Bonds retreat in Charleston, S.C. last week.

Charleston, S.C. - Second Lt. Kevin Danner and his wife, Monica, had an opportunity to spend a night alone together for the first time since their 5-month-old son was born.

And, as with many new parents, they wanted to make the most of that time.

The evening started with a four-course dinner overlooking the water, and ended with them spending the night at a five-star hotel in historic Charleston. The next day, they were treated to catered meals and were asked to do little more than enjoy being together.

Though their trip might sound indulgent, it was not. It did not cost them anything.

The Danners were one of several couples attending a Strong Bonds retreat with the 171st Infantry Brigade last week.

The Strong Bonds program is a unit-based program sponsored by the Army Chief of Chaplains.

The purpose of such retreats, said Chaplain (Maj.) James Smith, is to create stronger families, which in turn, create stronger Soldiers.

"When you're constantly being deployed, you can't form a strong bond," said Smith, Fort Jackson's family life chaplain. "A lot of the Soldiers who are in the training environment have been deployed."

But Soldiers who are not slated for a deployment can still benefit from the program, he said.

"(Soldiers) assume (they are) going to have 9-5 hours ... and they don't, so it's still like a deployment," he said, referring to the strenuous schedule of many of Fort Jackson's permanent party staff and cadre.

Smith said he has been presenting Strong Bonds programs for more than two years. Last week's program was centered on the book, "The Five Love Languages," which is one of many resources chaplains use during a Strong Bonds program.

Attending a Strong Bonds program is a chance for families to make a conscious effort to focus on their relationships, he said.

"When you come here, it's like a prime opportunity to reconnect," Smith said.

The Danners, along with the other couples who attended the retreat, did just that.

"It was a great experience," said Monica Danner. "I just think it's a great opportunity that ... everyone should take advantage of."

Her husband added, "I can definitely see how this could benefit everyone, whether you are brand new to the Army or an O-6 (colonel)."

Like Smith, Kevin Danner said the program is important in a training environment, such as Fort Jackson.

"I'm all about balance," he said. "So if you have a part of your life that's unbalanced, it throws everything off."

Attending retreats like this one, he said, helps maintain the family balance, which in turn, makes for a better Soldier.

The retreat consisted of a Thursday night dinner and a full day of classes Friday. Couples were also provided lodging, meals and free child care during the sessions. The on-site child care is just another way to make the retreats an attractive opportunity for families, Smith said.

"We recognize that families need to be together ...," he said. "It's just an easier fit to provide child care on-site (and we) do everything in our power to eliminate all the stressors."

Chaplain (Lt. Col.) Harry Reed, 171st Inf. Bde. chaplain, said he thought the retreat was a success.

"I think it was excellent," he said. "It was positive, it was relationship-building, and that was my goal - to build relationships."

Reed said one key element of this particular retreat was the Thursday night dinner, which allowed couples to share a romantic dinner while their children were being cared for by child care providers.

Providing that dinner, Reed said, took participants away from the hustle and bustle of work and better prepared them to receive the next day's marriage class.

"When they come, they might not be in the right mind set," he said. "With the dinner, we were able to get them in the atmosphere so then, when we came in this morning, they're still in that romantic (mood)."

This is the third Strong Bonds retreat sponsored by the brigades or one of its battalions, and there are three more on tap for this year, Reed said.

Though this particular retreat was focused on married couples, there are a variety of programs available for single Soldiers, families and those specific to pre- or post-deployment situations. Every Fort Jackson brigade has a Strong Bonds program. Reed said the retreats are an important part of teaching Soldier and family resiliency.

"With the multiple deployments, we lose that resiliency with our families and we need some type of program to restore that," he said. "And I think Strong Bonds is a good tool."

Smith shared a similar sentiment.

"Resiliency as a word just means the ability to bounce back," he said. "That's what a Strong Bonds retreat gives you."