

The golf course on base offers stunning views.

# Northern Lights ...

## Kodiak MWR Brightens Alaskan Sky with Award-Winning Programs

**A**t U.S. Coast Guard Base Kodiak, Alaska, Morale, Well-Being and Recreation (MWR) programs, facilities and activities are the lifeline that help service members and their families make it through long, grueling winters, and summers where rainstorms can last for weeks on end. The MWR team at Kodiak understands the importance of these quality of life benefits, and was recognized in 2013 by the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) as a finalist for the NRPA Gold Medal Award in the Armed Forces Recreation category.

“Overall, I think the whole idea behind the award for us, and even to compete for the award, was the total involvement of all of MWR and the entire staff,” said MWR Director Joe Bower. “For instance, when it came to the essay questions, I tried to tie in as many of my staff at the different MWR facilities and programs that we have, including on the engineering side, when gathering the information and consolidating it into the essays to come up with the best possible answer to their questions. MWR Programs Manager Linda Pena was very good at documenting the process in the system for us, which was helpful because we could bring all of the info together and review it, and then give it to our supervisor, who assisted in the final review.”

The MWR staff is able to offer the Kodiak community vitally important MWR facilities, such as the MWR Guest House; Northern Lights Recreation Center; bowling center; movie theater; softball field; outdoor horseshoe, batting cage and Frisbee golf areas; running trail with outdoor exercise equipment that goes around the Kodiak peninsula; Auto Hobby Shop that is popular with single service members; gazebos and picnic areas; golf course/clubhouse; boat house attached to the docks that features a crab cooker/steamer shelter, which is a cleaning and steaming station for all the fish or crabs that are caught; and Golden Anchor Banquet Room and Sports Pub.

In order to stay on top of the latest trends, and tap into resources and ideas from fellow armed forces recreation professionals, Kodiak MWR works closely with the Armed Forces Recreation Network (AFRN) and NRPA, for training and other guidance. The Boys and Girls Club of America (Armed



Outdoor enthusiasts can grab whatever they may need through Outdoor Recreation's impressive cache of recreation equipment that is available for checkout.

Forces Section) is also an important source for training and support. “The Boys and Girls Club offers a lot of opportunities and grants, and we have the ability to teach our youth using their programs,” noted Pena. “Last year they brought \$7,500 worth of free toys to us from the Toy Giveaway Foundation, and we had a big event in the hangar with a BBQ, and gave away the toys to the kids.”

### FACILITY UPGRADES

Although funding is tight, MWR has been able to realize some key facility improvements and renovations. In addition to upgrades at the MWR Guest House, the main lodging facility at Kodiak, MWR has been able to add four additional remote sites to the RV Park, which also features fire pits that were purchased through Belson Outdoors. MWR plans on adding more sites to the park this year as well.

Another notable project was the purchase of outdoor fitness equipment from TriActive America, and MWR now has numerous fitness stations set up along a walking trail on base. “The equipment is located in different locations around an area on the base called Nyman’s Peninsula, which is used a lot by walkers and runners who are active duty, dependents and federal employees,” said Bower, who pointed out that the equipment appears to be getting good usage, and feedback since the initial installation has been “all positive. My

coworker and I have used it and love the equipment. And, it also seems to be holding up with our harsh winter weather.”

Over the past few years the base has also completed several other projects, including renovating the scoring shack and softball field, and putting in a new gym floor at the Northern Lights Recreation Center, which houses the pool, racquetball courts, basketball courts, strength and cardio areas, a multipurpose room and a rock wall in the gym area, which has auto belays from TruBlue.

“Everything is tied into our Northern Lights Recreation Facility, which is our main facility here on base,” noted Bower. “And we are always updating and recapitalizing our fitness equipment, because one thing that we really strive to keep newer here is fitness equipment on board for the folks to use. This coming summer we will be replacing windows that are historical windows at the gym and the Guest House.”

The weight room at the Northern Lights facility houses Cybex strength equipment, and the cardio area houses Precor, Life Fitness, Stairmaster, VersaClimber, Concept2 and Trikke. The aerobics room was transformed into a multipurpose room, which is used for Crossfit-type workouts, and houses pull-up bars, punching bags,

kettlebells, free weights, weighted bars and bands, which are purchased through BSN Sports. Group exercise classes are also offered.

Another big project for MWR was the installation of a digital camera at the movie theater in 2013. “That was a \$135,000 project that we paid for with our NAF earnings in order to keep our movie theater digital, and match the Navy Motion Picture Program,” noted Bower.

## THE ECO CHALLENGE

One of the events that makes this MWR program so special is its annual Eco Challenge, a long-distance team endurance/adventure race that has grown tremendously popular since it began 13 years ago.

“The Eco Challenge is one of the events that we have here that involves a lot of volunteers — anywhere from 30-60 — who help us out with this adventure race that we have,” noted MWR Business Chief Rachael Dyer. “It is an amazing event to put on, and one that a lot of people look forward to. Because it is such a big event with so many teams and volunteers, it is one of the greatest MWR achievements that we have here, especially with our weather and locale.”

Running anywhere from 22 to 42 miles long, Eco Challenge events vary each year, but have included mountain biking, hiking, rafting, trekking and traversing with ropes, as well as some off-the-wall events such as Gumby suit races.

“It seems to get better each year,” said Dyer. “We get anywhere from 12-17 coed teams, and each team has a supporting crew that follows them around and makes sure that they have everything ready for them at the next transition point. It is a secret course, so the teams and support crews don’t know where they are going until they reach their checkpoint area. And we



Outdoor fitness equipment, placed at numerous locations along a popular walking trail on base, provides opportunities for the Kodiak community to get a good workout in the great outdoors.

have anywhere from 8-13 checkpoints, which are where they get their next set of directions.”

Dyer pointed out that a week prior to the Eco Challenge, Kodiak has an environmental service project for all of the teams and their support groups, as well as volunteers who come out to help. “We do a beach cleanup, fix or make a new trail, fix and create bridges

and crossings,” she explained. “It is one of the projects that they have to do if they want to be able to race in the Eco Challenge, and has been a great thing that we do for the community and the Coast Guard — making it better for everyone.”

“I think what makes MWR so special here at Kodiak is that we do a lot for so many people, and often with limited funding,” noted Pena. “We have volunteers who help our MWR staff so that we are able to offer a lot of extracurricular activities that you might not get elsewhere, and we try really hard to do it because we are so isolated here.”

## MWR PROGRAMS

In addition to the Eco Challenge event, Kodiak offers many opportunities for the entire base community to come together.

“We have been fortunate to have USO shows here, and we were lucky enough to have Gary Sinise’s Lt. Dan Band twice, Sesame Street twice, and we used to get Armed Forces Entertainment events, until funding was shifted to support troops overseas,” noted Pena.

“The importance of the MWR programs involves providing for the families here, such as with our youth activities, and our Boys and Girls Club, which falls underneath Linda,” noted Bower. “We do special things for the families, such as with our Winter Wonderland, where we take the entire pool and first floor of our gym building and we convert it into a Santa House, so kids can line up to visit Santa. We also create, using cardboard and other supplies, holiday scenes and themes in the pool, based on Disney movies or characters, for example.”

It takes the MWR team at Kodiak over a month to create the many cardboard cutouts of all the characters, and transform the entire pool and gym areas into a Winter Wonderland.

“We have our rescue swimmers over at the air station come over to push the rafts with families in them around the pool so they can view all of the scenes and decorations, while enjoying the holiday-themed music,” noted Bower. “We often make up for the lack of funding with creativity and teamwork.”

Kodiak also offers a strong youth sports program throughout the year for ages 5 through 14, as well as a Teen Center, which is for ages 10 through 17. “We do a lot of activities — our monthly calendar is filled,” said Pena. “In addition to that, we will do family events with the teens, and we have a concessionaire contract with a British Soccer Camp, which we do every year in August. We help supplement the cost of camp for families, because it can be costly. We also help find families to house the coaches.”

Kodiak also does a lot for families during April, which is the Month of the Military Child. “For children under the age of 5, we don’t have a lot of activities for them, so we open up the gym once a week, and fill it with inflatables and let the parents bring their kids over and play with them on the inflatable slides and bouncy castles,” said Pena.

“For the Month of the Military Child, each facility will have a special,” added Bower. “Like, for example, a free ice cream at the pizza parlor, or red pin bowling at the bowling center, or a free showing at the movie theater. We do something every day of the month, and it culminates at the end of the month with our big Spring Fling event, which has family-friendly events and activities.”

In addition to the numerous programs and activities available for children on base, new playground equipment, tailored for ages 2-5 and 5-12, was purchased from Safeplay Systems in 2010, providing fun and safe places to play and be active.

It is also important to note that Kodiak has a number of cutters it caters to, including visits from all of the Coast Guard personnel who support those ships. “When they come here to Kodiak, it is either at the beginning of their patrol or at the end, and they are coming from the lower 48, so they will slide in here to refuel, and then all of the guys and gals from the cutter will come over to use the bowling center or movie theater or have a basketball or softball game,” Bower explained. “It is really nice to have these MWR programs and facilities available for them when they come here for these brief visits.”

MWR also supplies cutters with a Morale Supply Kit (MSK), which includes items such as hiking gear, fishing rods, snowboards and softball equipment, so while the cutters are away from Kodiak, and they stop at various locations along the way, service members have some things in the kit that they can use to boost morale.”

Kodiak also has a strong population of single service members, who are always looking for things to do on the island. “At our gear issue, under Linda, we have tents, snowboards, skis, snow tubes, sleeping bags, skis, backpacks, hiking gear — you name it, we’ve got it — and we supply that to everyone, including the single sailors, which is a great benefit. They do not pay a fee, but they do need to leave a deposit at checkout.”



Kodiak’s Spring Fling serves as a culmination to the Month of the Military Child in April, which includes month-long activities tailored to families.

In addition, party inflatables, which are purchased through Inflatable2000.com, Fun Equipment and Party Outfitter, are available for rental and use by MWR for events.

MWR also assists the Kodiak community in hosting a wounded warrior program. “We help provide boats and volunteers, and our local fishing experts take them out to go fly fishing, which is huge here,” said Bower. “We worked with Project Healing Waters this year, and it was a fantastic time fly fishing out in the remote wilderness with the guys, seeing the eagles and other wildlife out there. Many of us have bonded with a lot of those guys from Healing Waters.”

“We take kids on field trips to local spots or hikes, as well as other outdoor educational and environmental learning trips and excursions,” added Pena. “We also have an Earth Day program that is popular. Our youth also work with a group in town called HOPE, who are mentally challenged youth that come on base to use our MWR facilities. Our kids have worked with them to do activities such as rock climbing in the gym and laser tag.”

For outdoor enthusiasts there are campers, ATVs, trailers and boats that can be rented.

## IMPORTANCE OF MWR

In remote locations such as Alaska, the importance of MWR for service members and families cannot be overstated, said Bower. “I think our facilities and all of our programs, and everything that we do here, make it tolerable for all the families that come to Kodiak.”

Dyer, who has been at Kodiak for 20 years, 12 of those as athletic director, added that these programs and facilities “are heavily relied on by service members and their families, especially during the long, dark winters here, where these activities that we offer help them fight depression and keep their morale up, while helping them connect with other families and service members on base. Having different things for all these military folks to do helps them tremendously.” —GRF