

Program teaches veterans with PTSD how to care for horses

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Writer



SANTA FE – On a Friday in February, Air Force veteran P.L. Dillon made her way through several inches of snow to a corral at the Crossed Arrows Ranch, where she would tend to horses.

The wind blows cold here, and the panorama of the vast Galisteo Basin stretches out in the distance. The scene has an Old West feel, tinged with something more primordial.

In the 1970s, when Dillon was an Airman, she couldn't have imagined being here, working with horses, she said. As the volunteer coordinator for the Horses for Heroes women's veteran retreats, she said, this work has been vital to her life and recovery from post-traumatic stress disorder.

"You leave the ranch better-prepared to make your life for the highest good," she said. "You have the God-given beauty of these animals. The horses pull things out of you. And you can't do a thing in the presence of these animals except focus on the horse."

Online

For information about attending, volunteering for or donating to Horses for Heroes, visit its website at www.horsesforheroes.org.

Dillon found her brand of treatment with help from Army veteran Rick Iannucci and his wife, Nancy De Santis, who run the ranch and Horses for Heroes, a nonprofit organization aimed at giving veterans an opportunity to learn horsemanship.

“Horsemanship is leadership,” said Iannucci, a retired U.S. Marshal, West Point instructor and Green Beret.

The program is free and open to active-duty military members and veterans, especially those suffering from PTSD, combat trauma or physical injuries.

Iannucci said the focus is giving veterans a new mission by teaching them horsemanship skills.



A Crossed Arrows Ranch resident. (Ryan Stark/KAFB Nucleus)

“We don’t sing ‘Kumbaya’ here,” he said. “But working with these horses has some magical quality. It’s effective.”

Veterans stay together on-site in a bunkhouse while working at the ranch, De Santis said, which is a great strength of the program. It builds camaraderie among a group of people who understand each other’s experiences.

“We say, ‘What gets said on the ranch stays on the ranch,’ ” De Santis said.

When the program started in 2007, teaching horsemanship and ranching skills as a means of helping veterans was a new concept, Iannucci said.

“Back then, it was looked at as a fringe, alternative kind of thing,” he said. “We hope we’re helping to bring this kind of thing to the forefront.”

“Fringe” or not, Dillon said the retreat has been a vital part of her life and has helped quite a few of her fellow veterans.

“This has given me a sense of purpose,” she said. “You can’t change the past, but you can have this moment now.”

For years after her discharge, she faced similar challenges as many others with PTSD. She had a difficult time holding jobs and maintaining relationships.

“(Sometimes veterans) just don’t know how to connect with family or a job,” she said. “You can’t serve and not be changed.”

She tried therapy and medications, but nothing worked as well as working with horses, she said.

“I don’t think people realize what goes into caring for a ranch,” she said.



Horses for Heroes co-founder Rick Iannucci and Air Force veteran P.L. Dillon stand next to a corral at the Crossed Arrows Ranch near Santa Fe. Dillon is among the many veterans who have come to the ranch to learn horsemanship and ranching skills. (Ryan Stark/KAFB Nucleus)

Dillon used to be afraid of horses, she said, but now she finds the quiet ranch and hard work to be therapeutic.

She calls herself a novice compared with horsemen like Iannucci and De Santis, but she has made a lot of progress, she said. She even looks after the ranch when Iannucci and De Santis are away.

But a few years ago she was scared to even try to feed a horse.

“I had fears for decades,” Dillon said. “I can choose to see it objectively now, and not be at the mercy of those feelings like before.”

Like her, the veterans who come to the ranch enjoy the camaraderie of their fellow vets and the demanding physical tasks they are asked to do, along with the rugged beauty of the ranch, she said. For many, this is where they begin to work through their issues.

She relates to those who come to the women’s retreats, she said.

“Those women are able to express things that they never have before,” she said. “Because it’s not happening at a base or a Veterans Administration hospital, they are able to heal.”