

# TEARING down WALLS

UNIQUE  
HORSES  
FOR HEROES  
PROGRAM  
MERGES THE  
SKILL OF THE  
SOLDIER WITH  
THE CODE OF  
THE COWBOY

BY DUTCH HENRY PHOTOS BY NANCY DE SANTIS



Essential groundwork begins in the round pen. Veterans wait their turn to establish a partnership prior to saddling up. Photo by Rick Iannucci

Finding their way again after returning home is not always easy for veterans today. Perhaps it never was. But as Rick Iannucci, retired US Marshal, former Green Beret and co-founder of Horses For Heroes Cowboy Up! program explains, "The way we go to war now is radically different with multiple deployments, and the fact that there's no rear area now. Every man and woman has got to hit the ground running and is in immediate danger of hitting an IED, sniper fire or direct engagement. It's very demanding and often takes a heavy mental toll." Empathy, born of service, caused Rick to spring into action and, together with cofounder Nancy De Santis, create a unique program that merges the skills learned and fine-tuned as soldiers with the code of the cowboy, ranch life and the spirit of the horse.



The Cowboy Up! Crew, from left: Sterling Bucholz (USMC), Matt Moody (USAF), Chris Chaisson (USA) and Rick Iannucci (Special Forces) moving out for the gather.

Understanding both the skills, training and experiences of a veteran and life on a working cattle ranch, Rick knew he could connect the two worlds in a way that would make sense to a veteran struggling to adjust. The code of the cowboy is deep-seated in virtues such as camaraderie, lending a hand to help a neighbor, working hard until the job is done and respect. Not unlike the code of a soldier. Bringing the two worlds together would not only help veterans adjust but create brand new skill sets based on abilities they already possessed.

There are many components to the Horses For Heroes Cowboy Up! program, and as much as these different aspects of healing revolve around the cowboy code and ranch life, so too do they revolve around the healing spirit of the horse. When a veteran first arrives at the ranch, they learn basic, and some not so basic, horsemanship skills.

### “HORSES ARE THE BACKBONE OF THE PROGRAM”

“The horses are the very backbone of our program, and it is important that the participants learn basic horsemanship skills, and how to properly care for our beloved equine partners,” Nancy said. The horsemanship portion of Cowboy Up! is an essential part of their 13-objective program, complete with a graduation ceremony and awarding of the “Purple Wild Rag,” in honor of their endorsement by the Military Order of the Purple Heart. It and every other aspect of Horses For Heroes Cowboy Up! is self regulated—each veteran progresses at his or her own pace. “It’s the veteran’s healing that is important, not the actual objectives in any given program,” says Nancy.



The program's first Native American graduate Alroy Billiman (Navajo) in the sorting pen during spring branding.

What the veteran learns and experiences in those first days and weeks is fundamental, lasting—and life changing. From their training and experience as soldiers, most veterans have built walls around their feelings and emotions. Such walls were necessary to keep them safe in a form of separation while deployed, but now keep them separated from family, friends or even their own spouses and

continued next page

“As veterans begin to experience the life of a working ranch they’ll be doing it with other warriors who’ve shared the same experiences— from life during deployment to stress at home, and now to life among dust, mud, sun, rain and friends. They know how camaraderie and working together is as good as it gets and is familiar to veterans. These warriors may not have felt that camaraderie for years, as the walls don’t only lock in, but lock out, too.”

Director Nancy De Santis (left) works "from the ground up" with a program participant who is an Army veteran. Photo by Rick Iannucci



children. Such walls keep all emotion and attachment buried deep and out of reach. For many veterans the first time in a long time they are able to chip away at that wall is standing alone with a horse. The release is often so overpowering that emotions flow freely.

In those first days Nancy and Rick introduce the veterans not only to horsemanship, such as how to politely approach a horse, brush, halter and lead, but also how to feel the horse and his spirit. They do this by allowing the veterans to experience relationship-building with the horses in various ways. In addition to basic groundwork and getting them comfortable in the saddle, which will become important as they move up to the next phase of riding herd and regular ranch work, Nancy explains they include the veterans in caring for the horses. Not just feeding, grooming and stall maintenance, but actually working with the horses for their own comfort and well being. They instill in the veterans that taking care of the horses' needs helps them to take care of their own.

## HORSES ARE HEROES, TOO

Nancy knows therapy horses work hard, and such work can be demanding of not only their bodies but their minds as well. Their horses really have two jobs at Horses For Heroes Cowboy Up! as they are active-duty cow horses as well as "instructor" horses. She works with the horses intuitively and physically, incorporating fun stretching exercises, light massage and even Reiki, to keep them healthy, comfortable and happy in their jobs. She incorporates the veterans in these exercises, too. By learning how to do these exercises with and for the horses, the veterans learn a lot about "reading" and understanding horses—and reading and understanding themselves. As Nancy says, "We teach the veterans to read the horse, and the horse teaches the veteran to live in the moment." For many it is something they've forgotten how to do.

When they are satisfied with how a veteran reads, feels, respects and sits a horse and can calmly work with cattle, they'll pass through the "Purple Wild Rag" ceremony and move on to ranch work with the numerous ranches that are their program partners. This is now a commencement into a world made up of hard work, open range, cows, horses and living the cowboy way. They'll soon realize how easy it is to get lost in the spirit of a life among cows, horses and friends. They discover that working together with friends who have been there can chip away at those walls that suffocate.

As veterans begin to experience the life of a working ranch, they'll be doing it with other warriors who've shared the same experiences—from life during deployment to

## RIDE TO REMEMBER

The veterans and volunteers of Horses For Heroes - New Mexico Inc., will be joining forces with The American Competitive Trail Horse Association (ACTHA) for the first annual "Ride to Remember" on November 11 and 12. You're invited to hit the trails with them and join in a nationwide remembrance and tribute to our servicemen and women. Every ride will assist in raising much-needed funds for those nonprofit organizations that support our wounded warriors. For details go to [www.actha.us](http://www.actha.us)

"We teach the veterans to read the horse, and the horse teaches the veteran to live in the moment."

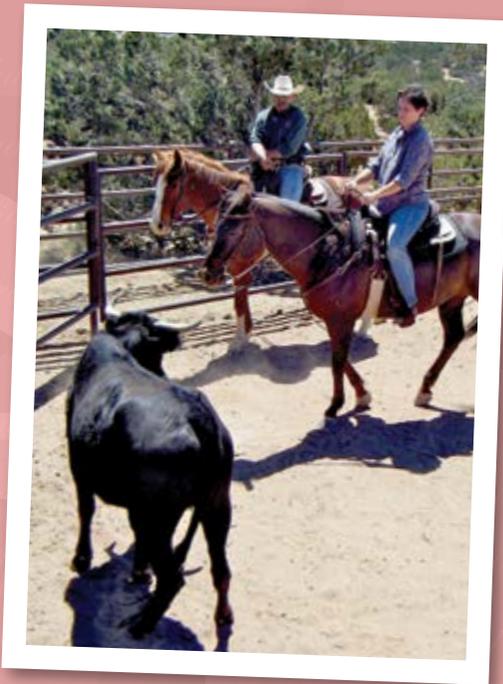
Horse health care is a #1 priority. Rick Iannucci demonstrates proper deworming procedures to the veterans, who will all take their turn.



# For Women Only

While most of the programs are open to men and women veterans, there is one program Nancy declares “for women only.” Each summer, she holds several Women’s Veteran’s Day Retreats. Because the women veterans have largely been underserved, Nancy wanted to start a program exclusively for them. At the day retreats, in the company of other women with like issues and backgrounds, they can explore things not easily spoken of in small sterile offices.

The day retreats are quite different than the Cowboy Up! program in that there is no riding or teaching horsemanship. This is all about exploring the healing process rather than trying to accomplish certain goals with horses. Through a series of groundwork exercises, the women create a partnership with the horse. Many female veterans live within very different walls than men, and the day retreats among the camaraderie of other women who’ve lived it, and the honesty of a horse who hears them, helps to crack open those walls.



Director Rick Iannucci shows first female graduate Emily Ruch the basics of low-stress cattle movement.

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## TAPPING INTO THEIR SKILLS

Rick understands that veterans coming to Horses For Heroes Cowboy Up! bring with them not only the torment of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), injuries or a sense of confusion but a strong desire to overcome those issues. To address that confusion, Rick taps the skills and training each veteran possesses. He’ll ask the veteran what their job had been and find a way to use those skills on the ranch. In that way a veteran can learn new skill sets that will serve him or her without starting over completely. And it roots them by standing firmly on ground they can find familiar.

As an example, Rick explained, if a Marine is going to advance, perhaps to rescue a stranded fellow Marine, they are trained to survey the lay of the land. Where might the danger be? What is the safest course to travel? He teaches the veteran to use that training when they are looking for a lost momma cow or calf. In surveying the terrain as they were trained, they can identify likely hiding places as well as the most sensible approach. Just as charging right in to rescue a fellow Marine would be dangerous, charging across open land toward the nearest ravine will most likely only scatter the cattle. By applying skills they already know to a new job, the veteran can find strong roots in themselves and chip another hole in the wall of confusion.

## THE COWBOY CODE

The cowboy code is about more than being a good horseman or cowman. It’s about caring

for others too, about being part of a big family, and helping the neighbors. It’s not always riding and cowing at Horses For Heroes Cowboy Up! The day might be spent loading a truck with tools, parts and pipes to help a neighbor with a broken windmill. Helping neighbors is a big part of the cowboy code and soldier’s creed.

The volunteers, veterans and neighbors are hard at work building a bunkhouse so next year even more veterans can come learn how to sit a horse, drink coffee around a campfire with friends, and tear down a few walls. Nancy and Rick have created a unique program that can help change lives and restore hope and confidence. Let the walls of the new bunkhouse be filled with pictures of smiling, laughing faces by this time next year!

To learn more about Horses For Heroes New Mexico, Inc, Cowboy Up!, their programs or how you can get involved, visit their website [www.horsesforheroes.org](http://www.horsesforheroes.org)



Dutch Henry is a writer and novelist who writes about “People & Horses Helping Horses & People.” He resides in Virginia with his wife of 36 years, Robin, and a horse, dogs, cats and chickens. Dutch also does Therapy For Therapy Horse Clinics at therapeutic riding centers

across the country to help horses maintain proper posture, movement and body carriage—because therapy horses can use a little therapy, too. You can reach Dutch at [dutchhenry@hughes.net](mailto:dutchhenry@hughes.net)—he would love to hear from you. His novel, “We’ll Have the Summer,” is available on Amazon and at [www.dutchhenryauthor.com](http://www.dutchhenryauthor.com)

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