

HOW HORSES **CAN HEAL**

PROGRAM HELPS VETERANS RECOVER
THROUGH WORKING, BONDING WITH EQUINES

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MORGAN PETROSKI/JOURNAL

From bottom left clockwise, Army veteran Andres Lazo, Nancy De Santis, Rick Iannucci and Navy veteran Keith Coronel surround Rain, a horse at Iannucci's Crossed Arrows Ranch as part of the Horses for Heroes program.

On a ranch south of Santa Fe, Andres Lazo showed some friends the rips in a cloth cover he was wearing over his combat helmet when shrapnel from an EFP, or explosively formed projectile, tore through and hit hard enough to dent the helmet. He still carries a piece of metal doctors pulled from one arm after that explosion.

“That helmet saved my life,” he said.

“That’s why you’re ‘Lucky Laz,’ ” said rancher Rick Iannucci, as he wrapped Lazo up in a hug. Lazo, 26, is a University of New Mexico student back after a 13-month Army deployment in Iraq. He and CNM student Keith Coronel, 32 and a 10-year veteran of the Navy, were at Iannucci’s Crossed Arrows Ranch, 3774 N.M. 14, on Sunday for spring’s first day of Horses for Heroes, a program Iannucci started last year with Pecos riding instructor Christina Savitsky. Iannucci is an ex-Green Beret and U.S. Marshall. He founded Horses for Heroes, H4H, after he heard of a program in 2007 out of Walter Reed Army Medical Center, where disabled soldiers were placed in therapeutic horseback riding programs. The program is intended to help returning veterans cope with the stress of integrating back into civilian life.



Navy veteran Keith Coronel brushes Rain at Crossed Arrows Ranch.

“There was a vacuum, in my opinion, between what the veterans administration ... and other government agencies were doing, and what was really happening,” he said. “They all do a great job but they’re out-gunned. The numbers of soldiers coming home are too big.”

Iannucci explained that the life of a working cowboy is very similar to the life of a soldier. Since part of H4H is about reintroducing soldiers to civilian life, not only will veterans learn basic horsemanship but other skills as well.

“This isn’t just about getting on a pony and riding around an arena,” he said. “The cowboy culture is almost a parallel to the warrior culture. When these (veterans) came back from Iraq and Afghanistan, they were lost in a lot of ways.”

Sunday was easy for Lazo and Coronel, the only two vets on hand to work with the horses. At least five more are expected to join them in the coming weeks, and Iannucci expects closer to 20 soldiers by the summer out of the Wounded Warrior Project at the University of New Mexico.

While a kettle of coffee stayed hot on a nearby campfire, the pair picked dirt from the hooves of two black horses, then brushed each one simultaneously. As they rubbed across either sides of a horse's belly, it looks like it's in heaven — eyes glassed over and closing, lower lip dangling open and vibrating slightly.

“A lot of being out here is just being outside, on the east side of the mountains,” Lazo said. “It's nice bonding with the horses. It really happens.”

Coronel said he never saw combat in his time in the Navy, but as president of CNM's veterans club he knows others who have. He's recruiting them to join him at Cross Arrows Ranch, he said, because he knows it will help.

“I like it out here,” he said, “it's very relaxing, very laid back, and you really engage with the horses.”



Army veteran Andres Lazo uses a curry comb to loosen hair and dirt from Rain. Lazo, a veteran of the Iraq War, is learning basic horsemanship in the Horses for Heroes program.

Lazo and Coronel are just in phase one of the program, learning the basic horsemanship of riding and bonding through grooming and saddling. Once they get those techniques down they'll graduate to the second and final phase that includes farm work like branding, mending fences and working with livestock. Then they'll have the skills to branch out and work at other ranches.

Iannucci envisions pairing H4H with Turquoise Trail Wranglers, a 4-H club he also runs out of his ranch.

“Now these soldiers will be helping out,” Iannucci said. “They'll have a new mission, which what they've been looking for.”

H4H is endorsed by New Mexico's Military Order of the Purple Heart and the New Mexico Cattle Growers' Association.

Also on hand Sunday were an HBO documentaries film crew and Sgt. Andrew Brandi, a Vietnam War veteran, author and outspoken advocate — at the state and national level — for improving care of returning veterans.

“Never in the history of this country have so few people gone through so much combat,” he said, noting that World War II and Vietnam War vets saw an average of less than 260 days of deployment, whereas Iraq and Afghanistan’s veterans average more than 1,000 days at war. “They come back with no de-boot camp.”

Brandi has given workshops on coping with post-traumatic stress disorder. He said he plugs the 4H4 program at every opportunity.

“If they want to come back and learn to be cowboys, that’s great,” he said. “What Rick’s doing with them is very similar to training; it’s like the code of honor for a warrior.”

Said Lazo: “Over there, you’re always on a mission mentally. This gives you a new mission, a purpose. And they welcomed me with open arms. It’s so nice here. It’s a big thing to come back and be with someone who cares.”



Nancy De Santis watches Andres Lazo, left, and Keith Coronel use teamwork to pick a horse hoof at Crossed Arrows Ranch on Sunday.