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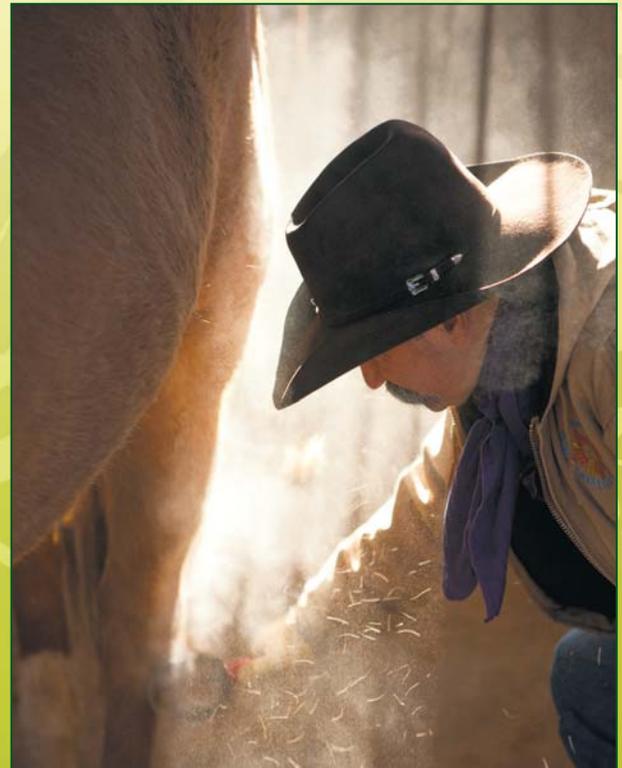
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Photos: Left, Don Usner. Right, Maggie Muchmore.





| Nancy De Santis and Rick Iannucci

Horses for heroes

story by EMILY RUCH
photos by KATE RUSSELL

Tall and slender, with rivulets of golden-brown hair cascading loosely down her back, when she greets me at the door my first thought is that this woman is as stunning as she is strong. Before I have a chance to introduce myself, Rick comes striding across a ruddy stretch of Saltillo tile and shakes my hand warmly. He immediately offers me a cup of tea, and Nancy pulls three mugs from the cupboard. As we wait for the kettle to boil he asks about my time in the service, my family's ranch and whether or not I take honey in my tea. Meet retired U.S. Marshal and former Green Beret Rick Iannucci and his fiancée, Nancy De Santis, both of the Crossed Arrows Ranch. Together they administer the Santa Fe-based nonprofit

Horses for Heroes-New Mexico, Inc., and Cowboy Up!, its visionary horse therapy and vocational rehabilitation program for veterans.

Steaming mugs in hand, we file into the living room and sink deep into the cushions of two overstuffed sofas. Rick is an eager storyteller, and by the time I've taken two sips he is well on his way to recounting how he and Steve Price of the Bonanza Creek Ranch shared an epiphany that ultimately led to Cowboy Up's creation. He recalls the moment when, weary with the sweet exhaustion of a long day spent gathering cattle, they realized how beneficial cowboying could be for combat veterans. The room fades, and I'm saddling up with my uncle in the dark, slipping through shadows of mesquite and redberry juniper while dawn is just a thought on the horizon. Maybe, I muse, cowboys have had it figured out all along, and I mention what feels right to call the spirituality of horsemanship. "Which is huge for us," Rick responds. "Some of the old timers get it. They don't say it like we say it. You know, 'I don't know about no zen stuff, Rick, but I sure do feel right when I'm ahorseback!'"

That "zen stuff" is exactly what Rick and Nancy strive to share with veterans suffering from physical injuries and combat trauma. "The effects of war, especially in the space age, and multiple deployments—the operational tempo is unlike anything anybody's ever experienced before," Rick says. "I see these kids comin' off these airplanes—they don't even shave and they've got a combat patch." I shake my head, remembering the day my youngest joe celebrated his eighteenth birthday in a forward operating base chow hall. "Holy shit!" Rick says, "This kid will have seen more combat than all of his ancestors put together in his short little lifetime." Unfortunately, it's not uncommon for young soldiers to serve three or even four deployments of twelve to



eighteen months apiece in today's modern, all-volunteer military, and some serve more, so it's little wonder we're seeing such a high incidence of PTSD among returning vets.

Rather than shying away from this overwhelming problem or becoming paralyzed with despair, Rick and Nancy approach it in the no-nonsense manner of a cowhand mending fence—sometimes literally. Through partnerships with the New Mexico Cattle Growers' Association and seven member ranches, Cowboy Up gives veterans a chance to try their hands at a variety of common ranching procedures, relying on the remarkable similarities between the cowboy and warrior cultures to provide them with vocational rehabilitation that goes far beyond preparation for a new career. Horses are at the heart of the program's success. "The horse is the first equation of the program," says Nancy. "When they come in here and work with horses, it's their first handshake of getting back to themselves and touching their center," she says, "because they've been so lost, especially with coming back into society and trying to reintegrate."

Rick leans over and selects a ginger cookie from a dish on the coffee table, considers it for a moment and then delicately nibbles off a corner. Between bites

he tells me how a lot of the guys feel they get more from an afternoon on the ranch than they get from months of treatment at the VA. "No disrespect to the VA, they're just outgunned out there. I mean they've just got people comin' home in buckets."

"I think that's what nature does for our spiritual being," Nancy responds, "You're stuck in a white room, you're already kinda tense."

"And you've spent the last four or eight or twenty years," I add, "being conditioned not to talk about that stuff."

"Especially to somebody you just, like, 'What do I have in common with you, and why should I dig down and tell you anything?' Whereas they get out here..." He glances out the window at the silvery folds of sagebrush-dappled foothills. "You know, we're not counselors, we're comrades. So when we sit around that fire up there, after you get off your horse, first of all you've already had a great experience, 'cause you've done the physiotherapy part—I don't care who you are, you get on that horse you're gonna feel fine. It's just the balance, the motion, they even have a whole science called hippotherapy that delves into the movement and how—"

"—the horse mimics a human's walking," Nancy cuts in.

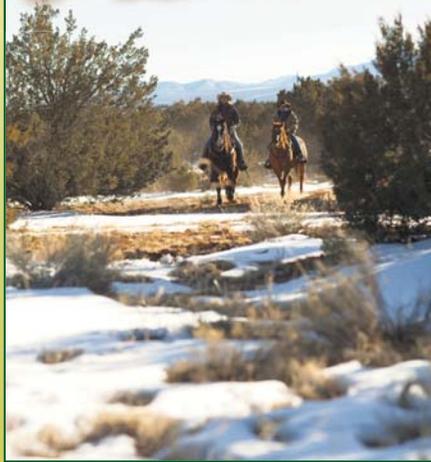
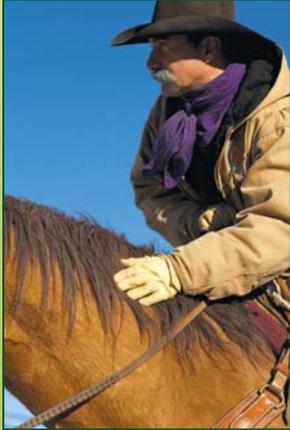
Horses for Heroes utilizes a combination of hippotherapy, therapeutic horseback riding and equine-assisted psychotherapy, but Rick and Nancy don't get too caught up in the terminology. They're happy to admit that they've stumbled, albeit with decided skill and intention, onto a powerful recipe for the restoration of body, heart and soul—equal parts camaraderie, American Quarter Horse and Turquoise Trail, a pair of fencing pliers and a pinch of faith—and they tailor the ingredients to suit the unique challenges faced by each individual veteran with impressive results. "We had a girl that was in a wheelchair for three years," says Rick. "They just never dreamed she'd ever go horseback again. We got her horseback, and she's ridin' now and doing very, very well."

"Her horse," Nancy says, "is her therapy." She smiles and crosses her legs at the knees, faded blue jeans mirrored in a matching pair of friendly, blue eyes.

Beneath the tidy bristle of a horseshoe mustache, Rick is smiling, too. "The things that we see happening are just so rewarding, so magical at times," he says. "You have the magic of the horse, and then you start seeing people transforming again and the light coming back in their eyes."

That sense of satisfaction is enough to make all the sacrifices and hard work

Horses for heroes



worthwhile. Occasionally the nonprofit receives a donation, but it's predominantly funded out of Rick's pension. "The balancing act for me," he says, "is not to put my family in the poorhouse while still maintaining operational levels of efficiency for the program. So that means the right amount of saddles, the right amount of horses. You know the expression 'They eat you out of house and home'? Well we get that, because they literally do." By partnering with the VA and the New Mexico Military Order of the Purple Heart, who handle intake and vetting, Rick and Nancy have managed to virtually eliminate administration costs. None of the instructors are paid, so essentially every cent of every gift goes directly to the program. "Basically it goes to feed the horses," Rick explains.

Of course, you won't catch these two complaining, not least of all because they get to spend every day working with horses on their beloved (and breathtaking) Crossed Arrows Ranch. "It's the best job I've ever had," says Nancy, "the most rewarding." I'm suddenly reminded of a freckle-faced girl in purple ropers and a pair of hand-me-down chaps, memorizing words like "fetlock" and "withers" and dreaming of one day growing up to be a bona fide cowgirl. When Nancy throws on her old, tan cowboy hat with a hawk feather resting on the weatherworn brim, I realize this woman is living my dream.

With a knowing grin, I recite an old Arabian proverb—"The wind of Heaven is that which blows between a horse's ears"—and ask, "How have they managed to enchant mankind for so long?"

"Well, I like the Arab quote there," says Rick. "Man's search for meaning has always centered around things which are magical and majestic to him. The Indians call God the Great Mystery, and I think horses rank right up there with that level of creature. They are a great mystery."

"The sheer size of them and beauty of them," says Nancy with reverence, "I've always found that hard to put into words, to be honest with you."

"They're scary, and at the same time they're gentle. Kinda like the ocean," Rick reflects. "When you see the ocean, you go, 'Wow, that is just so beautiful.' And waves are crashing, and you know that if you swam out there you'd probably get sucked right out into a tide and perhaps drown unless you can defy nature and death. The way I look at it is these creatures are gifts from God, and God has allowed us to establish a partnership with them to accomplish the things we need to do in life."

"I'd say freedom, too," says Nancy. "To be on that horseback and go with the wind in your hair and ride like the wind!" Unable to say it any better myself, I nod in agreement.

"You got a pair of boots?" Rick asks, without warning. "We might even be able to rustle you up a pair."

As it happens, I have a pair of boots in my Jeep at this very moment. "Because I didn't know what might happen when I came out here!" I say, laughing.

"Well, why don't you come with us?" he asks. "You don't mind if they get muddy, do you?"

If you are a veteran or know of one who may be interested in Horses for Heroes-New Mexico, Inc., they can be reached at 505.798.2535. www.horsesforheroes.org. If you would like to make a tax-deductible donation, please visit the website or mail a check or money order made payable to Horses for Heroes-New Mexico, Inc., PO Box 1882, Santa Fe, NM 87504.