

Handling horses proves therapeutic for veterans

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BRISTOL — The smell of the hay, the steady clip, clop of the horses hooves and the smooth feel of their coats are helping military veterans with PTSD and other issues find safety, trust and respect.

Shepard Meadows Therapeutic Riding Center helps veterans recognize and overcome issues by teaching them mindfulness, centering their bodies and spirit, and gain confidence, said program director and Reiki master Cathy Languerand.

“What we do is unique. It’s based on body mind and spirit,” Languerand said, while stroking the nose of a tall Morgan and Clydesdale mix in the chilly morning air Friday.

How people communicate with horses is different, but not as different as one might think, she explained.

“You can’t look at them eyes on eyes. You have to let them come to you,” she explained. “You push on a horse they’ll go away or they’ll push back, like people.”

Marine and National Guard veteran Rick Scarola, of Bristol knows that now. He has been through the seven-week therapy program three times and is now a regular volunteer at the center.

“I was never around horses growing up,” he said, furrowing his brow. “They were intimidating. I was apprehensive.”

Scarola, a Desert Storm veteran, said his trauma comes not so much from battle, but for preparing people and dogs to go into battle. He trained people who were to be deployed, as well as training the dogs that would join them in war. Many of them didn’t come back, he said.

“When I derailed in 1999, I basically isolated myself and shut myself down,” Scarola said, shyly stealing eye contact.

He took courses and went to groups through Veterans Affairs. Last year, he began treatment at Shepard Meadows.

“Even if I was having a bad day, just looking at the horses, saying nothing, it gets you to thinking, do some introspecting about where you are,” he said, “It makes you think life is too short.”

Languerand said learning to work with the horses helps people to work better with other people.



Veteran therapy

Marine and National Guard veteran, Rick Scarola, strokes one of the therapy horses at Shepard Meadows.

“Horses read your energy, but in a nonjudgmental way,” she said, stuffing her cold hands deeper into her coat pockets. “We’re teaching about safety. The first thing the vets do is assess their safety. The horses do that too, and they see that. People learn to get grounded and connected on the horses.”

The program, which has only been around the last year, is not yet covered by insurance, but board officials and center leaders are hoping that will change in the near future.

It already has for troubled or disabled youths in cases where a doctor prescribes the therapy, said board president Patricia Fournier.

While there are volunteer programs for adults and youths ages 14-21, center leaders are looking to start a junior volunteers program for kids ages 10-13.

The center is also looking forward to expansion. A covered arena was unveiled in October, which center officials and board members hope to raise funds to fully enclose by next winter. “You can’t promote a veterans program by shutting down in winter,” said Shepard Meadows CEO Cynthia Policki. “You can’t tell them you can’t help them because it’s snowing.”

As a bitter wind whipped across the open fields of the large property, Scarola climbed into a tractor and started clearing out the manure.

He smiled as he loaded it into the shovel in the enclosed tractor, while Languerand watched

“We’re teaching communication,” she said, smiling. “It’s a trust-based, two way communication.”

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