

Serving the Older Veteran

By Sandra Sibley and Deborah Sords

In 2006, Fieldstone Farm Therapeutic Riding Center (TRC) played host to a unique group of veterans who changed the face of equine assisted activities and therapies (EAAT) at the NARHA Premier Accredited Center in Chagrin Falls, Ohio. Robert Sposito, former president of the center's board of trustees, conceived the idea after reading a *Newsweek* article about a program founded by Mary Jo Beckman at Fort Meyer, VA, that provided EAAT to wounded service personnel. Her success inspired him to investigate the

Two former Cleveland Browns players were among the special visitors to the veterans during their session at Fieldstone Farm TRC. From left, former Cleveland Browns player Andre King, Vietnam Veteran David Orzech riding Goliath, former player Jim Houston and Fieldstone Farm TRC Instructor Sandy Kutash.

possibility of offering a similar program at Fieldstone Farm TRC.

"I thought for sure with two large Veterans' Administration hospitals in the Cleveland area, we could mirror the Walter Reed/Fort Meyer program without much trouble," said Sposito, a Korean War-era naval veteran, served on a destroyer from 1953 to 1957.

Bringing the vision into the arena took a year of effort and dedication by Fieldstone Farm TRC's Head Instructor and NARHA Certified Advanced Level Instructor Mary Goff Hipp. "The biggest challenge was finding the right referral source," Hipp said. "Being a government agency and a hospital to boot, it was difficult to locate the right contact. There were a lot of failed

attempts trying to cut through the 'red tape' before finally connecting with the right people."

What Hipp found was that by the time veterans from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq returned to Cleveland, they were being served on an outpatient basis and not easily accessed for EAAT programming. The veterans from the Louis V. Stokes Veterans Administration Medical Center in Brecksville, OH, a suburb of Cleveland, were not the "young, wounded warriors" originally envisioned by Sposito. The nine men and one woman who came to Fieldstone Farm TRC were World War II-, Korean- and Vietnam-era veterans, and ranged in age from 59 to 85 years.

The veterans started eight weeks of ground and mounted equine programming in October 2006. Each two-hour-



class was divided between therapeutic riding and ground lesson programming. Neither NARHA Certified Registered Level Instructors Sandra Sibley nor Deborah Sords had ever worked with this population previously.

Special Considerations

For the mounted portion, five men and the one woman met the 180-pound weight restriction and were able to ride. All six of the riders were lift mounts. For NARHA riding instructor Debbie Sords, the age and frailty of some of the riders added a challenging dimension to the instruction.

"We had physical and cognitive limitations which I hadn't encountered in the ring before," said Sords. "We had restrictions ranging from range of motion limitations to memory impairment to colostomy bags to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)."

Initially, the mounted lessons lasted about 20 minutes and were tailored to each rider's stamina and endurance levels. Before the lessons, leaders and sidewalkers were informed of not only the lesson plan, but also the medical issues specific to each student.

Laura Lindauer, volunteer director at Fieldstone Farm TRC at the time, specifically advertised for volunteers for the veterans' program. She found many individuals and local companies willing to assist.

"We had a great deal of new volunteer interest for this particular volunteer experience because of the veteran connection," Lindauer said. "Many people who had no previous knowledge of horses or desire to work with horses had such an emotional connection to the veterans that they overcame their fear or inexperience so they could become a part of the program," Lindauer added.

At first, lesson plans included basic walk, halt and steering cues. However, as the riders progressed, they included simple trail courses, and when the weather was cooperative, trail rides



World War II veteran Julius Morris riding Goliath. From left, volunteers Margo Straka, Marty Culbertson and Joe McMullin.

around the Fieldstone Farm TRC property. Repetition of cues and two- to three-step sequencing provided reinforcement of memory skills, including the repeating of each horse's and volunteer's names.

Special considerations included the veterans' anxiety, hearing impairments (which were intensified with helmet wear), and intolerance to cold and damp weather. Trail riding was conducted with caution, due to the PTSD of one of the veterans. Another unanticipated concern was lack of appropriate footwear. As residents of a long-term care facility, a few of the veterans only had moccasins or slippers. That issue was resolved through the efforts of the Veterans Administration staff, which saw to it that the veterans obtained the appropriate footwear for riding.

Because many of the riders had memory issues or communication difficulties, the volunteers were informed of signs that could indicate a rider's possible fatigue or physical and emo-

tional stress, including rapid breathing and skin color changes.

Despite the sometimes chilly and damp weather, the riders enjoyed their mounted experience. One of the riders who used a wheelchair as his primary means of mobility described riding as "giving me a freedom I haven't felt in years."

Ground Lessons

The ground lesson programming, conducted by Sandy Sibley, complemented the mounted lesson plan with a focus on physical activity and horsemanship. It also provided structured reminiscence opportunities, a popular activity for individuals with dementia and Alzheimer's-type conditions. This allowed the veterans the opportunity to reminisce about their own involvement with horses, providing a context for their experience at the center. All the veterans participated in unmounted programming each week.

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Those participants who were not able to ride spent both hours in the ground lesson.

The veterans spent part of the afternoon in the barn engaged in hands-on activities, such as grooming and horse care. With the support of the Veterans Administration staff and Fieldstone Farm TRC volunteers, the veterans were encouraged to stand and move about the barn.

"Grooming horses was a popular activity because it promoted use of both upper and lower extremities, reaching and stretching," Sibley said. "Weather permitting, we also took the veterans out for nature walks."

"The result was the veterans increased their endurance, mobility and flexibility. They also benefited from the soothing effects of touching a horse," Sibley said.

Back in the classroom, the veterans learned about all facets of horsemanship, including the role of horses in history and today. Lessons included horse conformation, breeds and colors. Of particular interest were units on equine communication, health care and nutrition. "The veterans could relate to the health issues affecting some of Fieldstone Farm TRC's older horses," Sibley said. "They had great

empathy for the horses."

The veterans compiled keepsake folders full of information, including photos from the program and of the horses.

Emotional Benefits

The benefits to the veterans extended well beyond their physical goals. "Several were from the dementia ward at the center. So they needed to understand and recall the educational aspects of how a horse behaves and uses its body to communicate. Our veterans needed to understand so they could be safe around the horse," said Ralph Burton, a certified therapeutic recreation specialist (CTRS) at the VA medical center. "It was important for memory and cognition."

"For our veterans with PTSD, it was a diversional activity," he said. "They were thinking so much about the horse and being on the horse they didn't think about what was going on around them environmentally that might have been scary in another setting. It was a big emotional benefit."

"The social and recreational benefits cannot be underestimated," Sibley said. "It was an all-day outing for the veterans with opportunities to interact with new people—adults and children.

We even had a visit from former players with the Cleveland Browns."

"The veterans were able to share their life stories with the Fieldstone Farm TRC volunteers and also with high school students who interviewed them. They so enjoyed their time with us, and we enjoyed working with them," Sibley concluded.

Hipp and Spósito also were pleased with the program's outcome. According to Hipp, "These deserving individuals made this program such a worthwhile venture. They told us such wonderful stories and really valued their opportunity to come here."

The program proved to be so beneficial that Fieldstone Farm TRC offered it again in the fall of 2007 and expects to continue it every fall.

Deborah Sords is a NARHA Certified Registered Level Instructor and a physical therapist certified as a Level II hippotherapy practitioner. Debbie has worked at Fieldstone Farm TRC since 2005, and is also an outpatient pediatric PT at Cleveland Clinic Childrens' Hospital Shaker campus. She can be reached at tbrider43@hotmail.com.

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