



Shaking the horrors of war

By Cara Spilsbury Staff Writer

Sun, May 11 2008

When Donald O'Hagan of Haverhill returned from the frontlines of the Vietnam War, his life was never the same. He can't seem to shake the horrors of war, or how it felt when he returned home to hear chants of "baby killer."

Don O'Hagan, a military veteran from Haverhill who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, enjoys time at Windrush Farm in Boxford as part of the new Horses for Heroes therapeutic riding program.



An Air Force veteran, O'Hagan suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, a severe and ongoing condition formerly known as "shell shock" that develops after exposure to extreme psychological trauma.

He tried suppressing his problems with alcohol, a habit he finally kicked. He then started speaking with a therapist. Little did he know that a suggestion from his psychologist to try horseback riding, a notion he at first dismissed, would greatly improve his outlook on life.

O'Hagan participates in the new Horses for Heroes program at Windrush Farm in Boxford, where the faint buzzing of flies and the clomping of horses' hooves are the subtle soundtrack to a haven from the chaos and pain in the outside world.



Windrush Farm offers therapeutic horseback riding for people with physical and mental challenges, and now with the help of Haverhill Director of Veterans Services Mike Ingham, that mission has expanded to include veterans suffering from their time at war.

"When my psychologist told me about it, I really wasn't interested," O'Hagan said. "I don't have much interest in anything. But I looked up their Web site and it was very impressive. What they do with children is amazing."

Now, his weekly riding session is one of the highlights of his life. Sometimes, the tree lines out at the farm trigger his disorder, a terror that may never fully go away, but learning to ride a horse for the first time calms some of it. "I'm going to be very disappointed if I can't continue with this," O'Hagan said. "I have no outside interests, no friends. This and my granddaughter are the only things I look forward to."

The staff at Windrush Farm, which Ingham and O'Hagan praise as dedicated and caring, makes each ride a safe and rewarding experience. There are two or three people with the riders at all times. "I'm very impressed with the staff," O'Hagan said. "They're very unselfish, dedicated people."

One volunteer drives up from southwestern Connecticut every Wednesday, a four-hour drive each way, to help with O'Hagan's hour-long session, a gesture that he couldn't be more thankful for.

"There's a stable 20 minutes from her house," said O'Hagan, "but she drives all the way up here because she really wants to help veterans. People weren't very nice to us when we got home, so maybe we don't expect any better. So when someone does something like this, I'm so flattered."

Ingham knows all about the power of riding a horse. It is his escape of choice from the stress and worry of daily life. "For the time that you're out there," he said, "you just focus on that animal."

O'Hagan, who has one son on active duty with the Army and a son and daughter-in-law in the Air Force, understands that it may be hard for veterans of any age to seek out the help they need. Often, service men and women do not want to be labeled with PTSD, an issue O'Hagan calls "the scarlet letter" for soldiers. But he promises that the Horses for Heroes program is worth giving a chance. "I'm ranting and raving about it to anyone that will listen," O'Hagan said.

Ingham drives with O'Hagan every week to his lesson, and has noticed a change as well. "He was excited right away," Ingham said. "He's just 100 percent into it. It's something that he looks forward to. I think it's been a life-changing experience for him."

Funded by private donations, the program is free for any veteran in need of help. Two slots remain in the program, which could expand if more veterans were to get involved. No riding experience is necessary.

"It's an opportunity for veterans to focus on and look forward to something outside of their regular life," Ingham said. "It takes the focus off their everyday problems. You can get out of the VA home or out of your house and get outdoors."

The 200 acres of pristine land, which is wheelchair-accessible, offers veterans suffering from post traumatic stress disorder and other physical or mental ailments a welcome distraction from the world around them.

"We'd love to have as many veterans as possible out here," said Jenny Tartaglia, the farm's Development Director, looking out over the lush, green land around her. "The farm is its own world."

Windrush Farm has 28 horses for use in equine therapy. First, guests learn the basics, like how to groom the animal. Then, before they know it, they're riding in harmony with one of the world's most dynamic creatures. The animal's calm trot and connection with its rider can offer a therapy unlike any other.

"They're all fantastic with children and adults," Tartaglia said of the stable of horses. "Once people get on a horse, they find that they love it."

"I love the closeness with the animal," he said. "We already seem to have a rapport with each other. People have even said that he acts differently with me, that he doesn't stand still for just anyone."

For more information about Horses for Heroes, contact Mike Ingham at Veterans Services, 978-374-2351 ext. 32.

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