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MILITARY: Horses help heal war's trauma

By Tom Pfingsten - For the North County Times | Posted: Friday, October 29, 2010 12:00 am

RANCHO SANTA FE ---- Behind the gates of an exclusive neighborhood a few miles from the Del Mar racetrack, a group of volunteers who call themselves "Pegasus Rising" is taking a novel approach to post-traumatic stress disorder: Pairing sufferers with horses for an hour a week.

President and CEO Gary Adler said this week that because horses are deeply sensitive to human emotion, they make perfect partners for combat veterans, whose psychological wounds run deep.

"For post-traumatic stress disorder, horses are uniquely situated because they're prey animals ---- their very survival depends on being sensitive to smell, sound and movement," Adler said. "Those are all triggers for people with PTSD. They don't want to deal with human interaction because they've lost trust, constantly dealing with people who want to kill them."

Vietnam veteran Willie Baumann said his post-traumatic stress disorder surfaced in the mid-1970s after two tours with the Navy but was not diagnosed until 2008. Shortly thereafter, he was one of the first veterans to receive help from Pegasus Rising.

"The animals ... gave me an inner peace, and I'm hardly even able to find the words to tell you how relaxing and calming it was," he said.

Thanks to the horses, the Vietnam-induced nightmares have largely subsided, he said.

"I used to see them sitting in the trees out there, all saddled up with rifles and bandanas ---- you name it. The hallucinations would just run rampant. And now? Not so much. I still have the occasional nightmare, but for the most part, life's good today."

The story of the horses ---- around two dozen Polish Arabians, a rare breed known for its endurance ---- is itself one of recovery.

Adler said the herd's ancestors were brought in 1980 to Sacramento, where they were kept in inhumane conditions and bred for three decades. When a group of volunteers rescued the horses in late 2008, they were suffering from severe neglect and showed signs that their contact with humans had been rare.

Adler said they were brought south, to Rancho Santa Fe, and at the same time ads went up on craigslist.com seeking volunteers to help care for the herd.

Cal Leary, now the volunteer coordinator for Pegasus Rising, said she responded to an online ad and was here the night that the horses arrived wild and scared.

"Body condition-wise, they were OK, but their feet were terrible," recalled Leary, who is originally from Liverpool, in the U.K., and now lives in Del Mar. "Nearly all of them we can halter and lead now. It's been a long process."

In fact, Leary doesn't need a halter for the mares, who on Thursday lined up and began walking behind her as soon as she entered their corral. Most of the horses now thrive on human contact, she said, and are gentle enough to begin restoring confidence to war-traumatized veterans.

When veterans arrive, they do what Adler called "ground work," rubbing, scratching, touching and walking with the horses.

"A lot of these combat veterans don't want to touch or be touched" by other people, he said, but something about a horse ---- whose finicky nature is like a barometer for pain and tension ---- coaxes the veterans out of their shell: "It's like all the barriers come down and they're children again."

As an example of the sensitivity that horses are capable of, Leary cited the morning when one of the herd's oldest and most affectionate mares had to be put down due to a bad case of colic. A tearful Leary wandered among the corrals and finally climbed up to sit on the edge of a small enclosure housing Neptune, a wary male who had to be kept apart from the rest.

"He pressed his head against the side of my face for 10 minutes," Leary recalled. "Some days he doesn't even let me get near him, but he just knew. It was unbelievable."

Adler, a retired attorney who practiced mostly in L.A., said the nonprofit group has served as many as 75 people since launching in June 2009, but hopes to reach hundreds more in 2011.

"If you bring up psychotherapy, a lot of military people don't want anything to do with it ---- they don't trust the process and they're worried about confidentiality," he said. "They don't even want to admit they've got PTSD, right? So this really couches it in a soft way ---- it's about reintegration, it's about healing."

For more information, visit pegasusrising.org. Contact the group via e-mail at inquiry@pegasusrising.org or by post at P.O. Box 8562, Rancho

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