

"HORSES FOR HEROES" Program to begin at Therapeutic Horsemanship Wentzville facility on April 1



Therapeutic Horsemanship (TH) Executive Director Dennis Costello says, "The "TH Horses for Heroes" is a very exciting and successful nationwide program that was created in 2007 by the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA) to help America's wounded service personnel and veterans. We are very pleased to bring "TH Horses for Heroes" to St. Louis area veterans."

There are now nearly 30 US riding centers helping veterans. The centers connect with Department of Veterans' Affairs Medical Centers and Clinics, as well as with individual veterans.

Dr. Paul Spiers, Chairman, Task Force, NARHA Horses for Heroes, says, "Appreciating the power of the horse to change lives is our goal."

The program has received national coverage in the media, including both CBS and NBC. One NBC journalist put it this way: "As a student of history, I've studied countless battles where horses were used to wage war. Little did I know that they're now being used to heal our soldiers after they come back from war."

TH has been helping individuals with special needs in the St. Louis area for 35 years. Equine Assisted Activities have been shown to normalize muscle tone, increase range of motion, improve balance, posture and coordination, instill patience and emotional control, and increase concentration and self-awareness.

Once "TH Horses for Heroes" is underway here, TH will be able to help veterans like Craig, 39, and Loren, 25, who know firsthand what "Horses for Heroes" can do. Both served in Iraq. Craig had back, hip, and thigh injuries, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and moderate traumatic brain injury. Loren had back, shoulder, and lower leg injuries, PTSD, and moderate brain injury.

According to the Department of Veterans' Affairs, they spent six weeks at a center in Northern California riding horses and strengthening their bodies, memory, and problem-solving skills while emotionally recovering from their combat experiences by building trust and relationships with the animals and each other.

Therapy included grooming and warming up with the horses, learning how to put on the heavy Western-style saddle, and developing basic riding skills using an obstacle course in an arena and short trail rides.

Craig says, "The only time I didn't feel pain was when I was riding in the saddle."

Loren suffered from short-term memory problems. His "Horses for Heroes" therapist Marcia Cushman says, "When he started coming here, he said, 'I'll forget what I did by the time I get to the car.' But by the fourth session, he came in saying, 'I know what to do, carrying out the whole grooming sequence.'" She says, "It was very rewarding to work with these two guys. They appreciated it tremendously, thanking us over and over again."

Here at our Wentzville facility, NARHA certified instructors and various professionals, including physical and occupational therapists, will help veterans physically and socially enhance their lives. The program will help veterans with challenges such as head and spinal cord injuries, amputation of both upper and lower limbs, auditory and visual impairments, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Gateway Chapter PVA members and all veterans with spinal cord injury or disease are encouraged to come and take advantage of our program.

Financial support for our program will come from grants, corporate sponsors, and individual rider scholarships.

For additional information about Therapeutic Horsemanship "Horses For Heroes" Program, please contact Sandy Rafferty at 636-332-4940 or at sraffot@gmail.com.

(NOTE: Re-printed from January/February 2010 issue of Gateway Chapter PVA Gateway Gazette.)