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Horses used to heal wounds of war

Breakthrough program will be offered in Yucca Mesa

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Courtney Vaughn Hi-Desert Star

Horses used to heal wounds of war

Kathi Savacool greets Cheyenne, a horse being boarded at Blue Barn Ranch. Savacool's ranch will host the Equus Medendi program for veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.



Bio Box

Open to participants

Equus Medendi is looking for participants. The program is free and confidential. Call (951) 941-0056 for more information, or visit www.equusmedendi.com.

Posted: Saturday, December 1, 2012 5:30 am | Updated: 7:50 pm, Fri Nov 30, 2012.

By Courtney Vaughn Hi-Desert Star | 0 comments

YUCCA MESA — Horses have had a longstanding relationship with humans, and for some veterans, they're helping them rebuild their lives.

After being medically retired from the Army in 2008, Marcos Luevanos found himself in a sweat. He was shaking, had difficulty breathing and suffered panic attacks. The Army veteran was withdrawing from the drugs prescribed to him to treat his post traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury.

"I told my doctors, there's a reason I don't do drugs, it's because I don't like that feeling," Luevanos said. "They weened me off, but said to watch myself and that they were going to give me therapy, but the VA is so packed, the soonest they could see me was months away."

With nothing left to lose, Luevanos agreed to do an equine therapy session.

He worked with Equus Medendi, a nonprofit organization that pairs horses with veterans in assisted training sessions. Participants lead, train and engage horses in games, all on the ground. The concept seems simple, but the relationship is dynamic.

Within weeks of starting the program, Luevanos was no longer relying on medications and no longer exhibiting as many symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

"I don't shudder as much at the sound of loud things. I used to jump, almost look for a place to hide, at the sound of a door slamming," Luevanos said. "Now, whenever I hear a bang, I try not to relate that to an explosion. I try to relate that to a horse shoeing a fly



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away.”

Equus Medendi, based in Grand Terrace, uses equine-assisted psychotherapy, which incorporates horses to foster emotional growth and learning. The therapy must be administered by a certified equine specialist

and a therapist. It offers horsemanship skills that transfer to the real world. Strangely, the program does not involve horseback riding.

“What makes horses different from any other animal therapy is the nature of them. The way that a horse functions, if you think about it, they’re flight animals. In the wild, they have to develop a sense of danger where they can have enough time to get away if they need to. They can sense threats,” Angie Sheer, founder of Equus Medendi, said. The Grand Terrace woman is a student of Monty Roberts, author of “The Man Who Listens to Horses.”

“Horses have this capability of relating to people who have experienced trauma. It’s indescribable, they just know, they feel it, they have that instinct,” Sheer said.

For the last four years, Equus Medendi has been working with veterans and active-duty military at no cost. The organization will offer the program locally as soon as enough participants sign up for the six-week course.

Luevanos, who lives in Moreno Valley, said the therapy sessions offered a confidential, non-threatening environment.

“My wife and I just went out there for six weeks and we met the horses and the first day we got to know each other. It was just us three, she never pushed or asked about Iraq or my disabilities or anything,” he said. During the process, Luevanos didn’t just learn horsemanship skills, He learned how to control his adrenaline levels and deal with his post-traumatic stress disorder episodes.

“It’s actually life-changing. It was so much more helpful than anything the VA could offer me,” he said.

His is just one of many success stories Sheer has helped create.

It’s why local horse owner and boarder Kathi Savacool decided to offer up her ranch in Yucca Mesa for the program.

Savacool has wanted to host a therapy riding program for years.

“My husband and I have lived here for 25 years and we wanted to give back to our communitiy,” Savacool said Wednesday. As she made her rounds around her property, which she calls Blue Barn Ranch, she mused about the similarities between horses and people who suffer from stress disorders.

“Horses need their space. You have to build their trust. The idea is that these veterans are brought together with horses and they interact with them and gain their trust. Animals don’t mislead you. It’s a very honest communication, she said. “Animals make us feel better.”

Savacool said animal-therapy programs can have a powerful place in the nation’s attempt to address post-traumatic stress disorder.

“It used to be that wounds that weren’t visible weren’t addressed,” she said. “It’s getting better now.”

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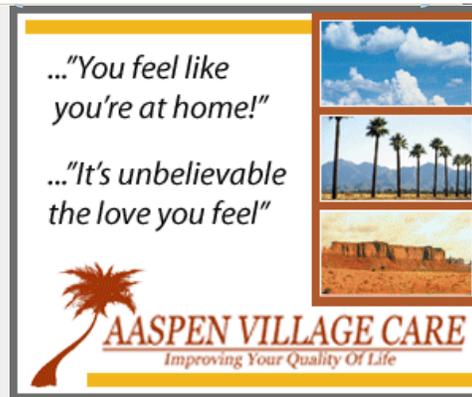
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