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## Program offers veterans horses — and hope

By **Richard Carrier**

Contributing Writer

There was no band, no balloon drop, no hand-shaking politicians, and no dignitaries of any kind. Not even a couple of colorful balloons or a handful of confetti welcomed the Lonesome Dove Equestrian Center's first two clients last Tuesday afternoon. But 55-year-old Richard Carney and 78-year-old George Flippin could not have received a more caring reception. A dozen enthusiastic volunteers and eight dedicated healthcare professionals treated the two veterans to a unique experience and one with the potential for significant long-term benefits.

Lonesome Dove Equestrian Center, the brainchild of Powhatan's Clint Arrington, is believed to be the only therapeutic riding center exclusively for veterans in the United States.

Canine companion animals have risen to a level of high recognition for their work with disabled persons as well as a more recent recognition of their therapeutic value to ill and older people. Even more recently, however, therapeutic riding, or equine-assisted activity, has had a significant impact on the physical, emotional, cognitive and social needs of all age groups and has been particularly effective with children.

Arrington's recognition of these values and his friendship with B.R. Burgess led to the concept of Lonesome Dove. He and a small volunteer army began to renovate the seven-acre site he owns on Old Buckingham Road. An indoor riding rink, five-stall barn, training room,

equipment room and cozy social room are completed or nearly so. In addition, an outdoor rink and an impressively constructed and equipped picnic area sit awaiting warmer weather.

During the renovation period, Clint Arrington put two more major items on his to-do list: earn his certification as a North American Riding for the Handi-

extended care's treatment program. Ms. Carlson does not rule out participation in the Lonesome Dove program by many more patients from the McGuire facility.

Tuesday, Jan. 15, however, was to be Richard Carney and George Flippin's day. Carney, a six-foot-tall Air Force veteran, was to be the first to ride the eight-year-old mare Mary Grace, one of four

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**ALICIA SULLIVAN**  
Occupational Therapist

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capped Association instructor and develop a client base. The natural connection was with Hunter Holmes McGuire Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Richmond. A phone call to Cara Carlson, McGuire's animal therapy coordinator in the geriatric and extended care facility, got a positive response. Ms. Carlson's experience with animal therapy helped her to recognize the value of Arrington's proposal. Equine therapy should "improve social skills, memory recall, balance, physical ability and posture," she said.

Carlson is so enthusiastic about the potential at Lonesome Dove that she "would like to see every one in our facility go through the program." There are currently 80 patients under geriatric and

horses the facility owns.

Carney is completely ambulatory and has had some experience ("I rode a couple of times as a kid," he said) with horses. A graduated ramp accommodates riders of almost any height, but Carney's long legs made it a simple task for him to straddle Mary Grace's broad back. For her part, Mary Grace stood quietly but seemed fascinated with George Flippin's motorized wheel chair. She explored the chair with her soft muzzle while Flippin stroked behind her long ears.

Therapy horses do not use a saddle. A saddle blanket and a Sir Single — a two handed grip which replaces the saddle — are more beneficial in developing balance and muscles. A lead walker, two



side walkers, as well as one to the rear, ensure the complete stability and safety of the rider, regardless of physical disabilities or limitations.

Enter Nicolle Zoet. Mary Grace was led slowly from the ramp and around the rink while this international horse woman encouraged the rider.

"Keep your back straight, shoulders and hips horizontal, head back just a little more Richard. Good, good, good. Nice posture and balance. Nice Richard."

Zoet is just one of 15 volunteers; Arrington is hoping for 15 more before the April grand opening. Zoet, a former model who owns a riding school in Holland, learned her riding expertise in both the French and German Calvary Schools and currently holds the NARHA's highest certification. She verbally led Carney around and across the rink for almost thirty minutes, emphasizing balance and posture.

Dismounting at the ramp, Carney was very enthusiastic.

"Very good," he said. "That was great fun. I was exerting myself all over. I'd really like to do it again."

If the program proceeds according to plan, he will be able to participate in hour-long sessions twice a week.

George Flippin's first experience was not as successful. Paralyzed on one side and confined to a wheelchair since 1997, he struggled to put his leg over the horse's back. He was able to sit sideways on Mary Grace's ample back, however, and even this limited contact inspired him.

"I haven't had my legs spread that wide in a while. I need to work on my muscles," said the Korean War veteran. He said he plans to work with his physical therapist to gain some flexibility, come back and try it again.

The health care professionals from McGuire included occupational therapists, nurse practitioners and interns, and they exhibited hands-on interest in the value of the therapy; they wanted to ride



COURTESY PHOTO

**George Flippin, 78, was helped onto one of the horses during his first equine therapy session at Lonesome Dove Equestrian Center. Flippin, a Korean War veteran, said he hopes to continue riding.**

the horse and experience the values first hand. Nurse practitioner Karen Carter was the first to volunteer and found that "it really relaxes the body. It loosens you up and makes you feel great."

Alicia Sullivan, an occupational therapist, was obviously excited about the experience. "It was very interesting. Once you do it you connect, you understand the commands she (Ms. Zoet) gives. When you do, it's very exciting to understand how good this is going to be for the posture of our geriatric patients. It works on the individual muscles and will help them to sit upright."

All of the services offered by Lone-

some Dove are offered free of charge to veterans and their families. Arrington's personal money has financed the project to this point and an application for non-profit 501 (3) c status has been filed.

B.R. "Bubba" Burgess's 15 years of experience as the operator of Make a Child Smile, a program similar to Lonesome Dove's, has been invaluable to Arrington as well. As with all non-profits, the needs are ongoing, including the need to acquire stock, equipment, feed, and supplies.

More information is available from Arrington at 804-357-9524 or Burgess at 804-357-9503.

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