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In the open, grassy fields behind Lonesome Dove Equestrian Center, an abiding respect and insight rivals any understanding that you'll find in a physician's antiseptic office.

Call it horse-patient confidentiality.

"Emotional and physical communication passes between our veterans and the horses," says Karen Ylimaki, secretary-treasurer of the eight-member board that oversees the equine therapy center in Powhatan, Va.

"If something is bothering you, go complain to a horse. They don't judge," she says.

Unpaid and dedicated volunteers run Lonesome Dove, a nonprofit organization that relies completely on donations. The center is dedicated to meeting the mental, physical and emotional needs of veterans in Central Virginia through equestrian activities.

The quiet 7-acre horse farm, served by Southside Electric Cooperative, is where heroes come to heal.

From a loving nuzzle to a soft nicker, horse lovers will tell you that the majestic creatures have a keen awareness — a sixth sense — of what is around them. “These horses are incredible animals, so loving and gentle and intuitive,” Ylimaki explains.

For example, Trouble, a miniature horse, might be a mischievous creature worthy of his name, but he’s also sensitive and loving with the veterans. “He will stand there for hours with them, as long as they need him. He lets them brush him or love on him. It’s a beautiful thing to watch,” Ylimaki says.



But when he’s not helping veterans heal, Trouble is usually trying to figure out how to break out of his stall. “Once, he figured out how to open his stall door and he broke into the place where we store hay and had himself a little feast” she says with a laugh.

Moving Moments Bring Purpose

The veteran stared into the eyes of the horse he was about to mount. The horse’s dark brown eyes were gentle, yet seemed to bore into the young man’s soul.

After the young man lost both of his legs in Iraq, the veteran’s father brought him to Lonesome Dove as a “last-ditch effort” to use “horsepower” to heal his son.

The moment was packed with emotion — and hope.

Ylimaki vividly recalls how three volunteers helped the veteran. “We were all standing there waiting to see how he would react. Then, all of a sudden, he let out a whoopin’ holler. ‘I feel like I have my legs again!’ he excitedly said.



“I looked over at his father and he had tears in his eyes. I remember thinking, ‘Yes! This is what this is all about!’ It was a beautiful moment to experience. And I have so many stories like that.”

After moving with her veteran husband from Chicago to rural Virginia 17 years ago, Ylimaki says she knows why veterans come to this special spot. “It feels like home. And we’re all like a big family here,” she explains.

Clint Arrington, a stonemason who died three years ago, was the driving force behind the creation of Lonesome Dove. The equestrian center opened in 2008 and Arrington wanted it to be a safe place where veterans could build resilience through equine-assisted therapy.

“Clint would have been so proud of the fact that, to date, we have put 3,500 veterans on a horse,” Ylimaki says. The oldest was a 104-year-old woman. “She was a pistol; she was awesome,” Ylimaki gushes.

Veterans who visit the center don’t have to mount or ride the horses. Sometimes, they just like to help clean used tack, groom the horses, or sit and watch them. Veterans come to the center from all over the country, but primarily on buses through Hunter Holmes McGuire VA Medical Center and Sitter & Barfoot Veterans Care Center, both located in Richmond, Va.

Richard “Red” Rose, member of Southside Electric Cooperative, has been on the board at Lonesome Dove for five years. He humbly takes credit for simply “putting the men and women on the horses.”

But it’s much more than physically lifting veterans; he helps lift spirits and bolster self-confidence as well. “Some of the veterans are nervous about getting on a horse and I just keep gently encouraging them and calming their fears until, before you know it, they’re on a horse and they fall in love with it.”

An especially memorable veteran, whom Rose affectionately nicknamed “Mr. Washington,” left quite an impact.

“He was blind and had lost one of his legs. He’d always show up with a Washington Redskins’ shirt, hat and gloves,” Rose remembers, chuckling at the memory. “And he would shoot a basketball off the horse. He did that for years and then he lost the other leg. He would sit up on the horse and proudly sing gospel songs and everyone loved to listen to him.”



PHOTOS COURTESY OF LONESOME DOVE EQUESTRIAN CENTER

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Rose says it feels good to be able to help military veterans. “To watch someone overcome something and be a part of it is really special,” he says.

Better to Give than to Receive

Steve Nelson, a retired teacher from West Point, has been president of Lonesome Dove's board since 2012 and sees the center as a way to give back.

But while giving back, there is so much for volunteers to "receive" through witnessing remarkable success stories.

One 19-year-old veteran, originally from Oklahoma, was pale and weak when he arrived at Lonesome Dove, Nelson remembers. He rolled in on his wheelchair with a spiked helmet covered with signatures of other veterans.

"He had a severe brain injury and he wore the colorful helmet to protect his head, because they had removed half of his skull," Nelson explains.

The young veteran was determined to ride a horse. And he did, Nelson says. But as the veteran waited for lunch, Nelson was concerned about the young man's deteriorating physical health.

"He was relaxing under a shade tree when he fell out of his wheelchair and onto the ground. I saw how frail he was, and I just didn't think he would make it," Nelson says.

But a budding friendship with an older paraplegic veteran from McGuire would be just the push of encouragement the young man needed.



"Before you know it, they were both out of wheelchairs and walking with walkers, and then by the time they left McGuire, they were both walking on their own. If you had told me that was possible when I saw that young man laying helpless in the grass under the shade tree, I wouldn't have believed it for a second."

Those are the kinds of success stories, says Nelson, that motivate people to want to come back and volunteer at Lonesome Dove.

It's not just the veterans who experience success stories at Lonesome Dove. Nelson purchased Tonto, a 20-year-old Morgan horse who came from a kill pen in North Carolina. Tonto was severely underweight and sick at the time. As his health grew more stable, Tonto proved to be a "terror."

"Everyone kept thinking he wasn't going to make it and be successful, but after patiently working with him for six or seven months, he's now as sweet as can be," says Nelson, who loaned Tonto to Lonesome Dove for use in the veteran-therapy programs.

He says, "We helped Tonto heal, so he could help heal some veterans. It's a neat success story, but from a different perspective. The veterans love Tonto."

Brad Furr, vice president of operations for Southside Electric Cooperative, occasionally volunteers at Lonesome Dove. Furr first heard about the work of the center during a SEC employee meeting that referred to a financial donation from the cooperative.

“The work they do with veterans really touched me, personally, so I wanted to get more involved and invite my coworkers at SEC to do so, as well,” he explains. Along with several other SEC employees, Furr recently volunteered at Lonesome Dove. “It feels good knowing that you’re a part of something so great.”

Horses for Heroes Ride

Sam Reedy of Mineral, Va., a member of Rappahannock Electric Cooperative and the 25-member Steel Warriors Veterans Motorcycle Club, dedicates his time every year on Labor Day weekend to help raise funds to support the center’s work.

Steel Warriors Veterans Motorcycle Club is a nonaffiliated organization of active duty, former military and military dependents. “We have a motorcycle ride to Lonesome Dove, where there are vendors, a silent auction, lunch, live music and door prizes. The whole event benefits Lonesome Dove because we support the work they do and the impact they make. We call it the Horses for Heroes Ride and this year, on Sept. 5, will be our seventh annual fundraiser for them,” he says.

Reedy, a Vietnam veteran, has volunteered at the equestrian center and calls it a very satisfying experience. “It’s nice to be able to talk to other veterans, and I think Lonesome Dove gives veterans encouragement and builds their self-esteem and confidence,” he says.

“The impact made by this equestrian center is huge.”



For more information, visit ldequestriancenter.com.