

## Horses, military personnel, veterans help each other

Patty Leon, Staff Writer POSTED: February 23, 2016 7:38 p.m.



Operation Horses and Heroes was four days of helping active-duty military personnel and veterans cope with issues through the use of equine-assisted psychotherapy. The event was held at Second Chances Equine Rescue in Gum Branch.

Second Chances founder Andrea Doolittle said she was overwhelmed by the community support, which allowed the event to provide the participants with meals each day. She said the support allowed organizers to have all the necessary supplies and

equipment to run the event, which meant the participants and clinicians could focus on the exercises and therapy programs.

Doolittle said she has loved horses from an early age and devoted a lot of her time volunteering at horse barns in the States and Europe during her 20 years in the Air Force.

“My animals, whether they were mine or I went to the barns to volunteer ... they saved me. ... I would have fallen apart many times over,” she said, noting that she knew that once she left the military she would do what she could to rescue horses.

And she knew from her experience that horses, in turn, would help others in need.

“Even something as basic as just grooming the horse is soothing,” Doolittle said, adding that equine-assisted psychotherapy is different from a ranch program in which people learn to rope and ride.

EAP is a form of psychotherapy and counseling using the horse as a therapeutic tool.

Participants were guided through exercises that addressed the areas of self-esteem, communication, reflection, boundaries, trust and confidence.

The participants were introduced to Operation Horses and Heroes founder Jerry Paulsen and clinicians Jinny Cash, from Idaho, and Michael-Renee Godfrey from Marietta. Along with them was a core of volunteers to assist the clinicians as needed to give participants one-on-one time throughout the course of each exercise.

In the beginning, the participants observed the horses as they were grouped together and socially interacted.

“You see a lot of yourself in a horse,” said Clara Martin, who is in the Warrior Transition Battalion at Fort Stewart. “And you see a lot of things that you didn’t always realize were going on in you. ... And once you recognize that, it is easier to cope with and easier to come to terms with.”

Another participant said he was surprised to see how each horse, much like each participant, displayed its own personality and traits. Each day, participants gained a better understanding of the horses while learning to peel back the layers on the issues or circumstances they need to face.

In all, 10 people participated in the first event.

Doolittle said she would like for this to become an annual or even a quarterly event if needed.

“I believe in the power of horse,” she said.

Doolittle, Second Chances Equine Rescue, and Operation Horses and Heroes will be featured in the April/May issue of Liberty Life Magazine.

Pick up a copy and learn more about the event and organizations.

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