

Georgetown Sertomans Pay Tribute to Horses for Heroes



For soldiers, returning home from war is a joyous occasion. But for many of our brave military men and women, coming home is just the beginning of a new challenge: learning how to heal from life-altering physical and emotional wounds suffered in service of their country. Rebuilding lives impacted by amputation, burns, traumatic brain injury and post traumatic stress disorder calls for hope and healing. And in the rolling hills of central Texas, soldiers are finding

that hope and healing with the help of horses.

The Horses for Heroes program was created by Nancy Krenek, a licensed physical therapist and founder of the Ride On Center for Kids in Georgetown, Texas. Long an advocate of the benefits of therapeutic riding in treating children with physical, developmental and emotional impairments, Krenek started the Center in 1998 as a hobby with one horse and four children. Today, the Center serves 180 clients, ranging in age from two years of age to 80, employs the services of over 200 volunteers and is home to a "R.O.C.K. Herd" of over 20 carefully selected and trained horses.

In 2005, Krenek was asked by a friend assigned to the 1st Cavalry Division Horse Detachment at Ft. Hood, Texas, to help create a program that would assist returning soldiers undergoing treatment at Brooke Army Medical Center. Having seen firsthand the amazing results of therapeutic riding with the Center's children, Krenek immediately went to work to help develop a program that could offer similar results to returning soldiers using cavalry horses. And Horses for Heroes was born.



Horses are by nature gentle and intuitive creatures, making them ideal therapy partners for individuals whose impairments create communication, trust and attachment issues. And because a horse's gait is similar to that of humans, biofeedback created from riding a horse can help retrain damaged motor and cognitive systems, as well as improve the individual's muscle tone, balance, posture, coordination, motor development, sense of control, emotional well-being and even reduce pain.

Using horses in physical, occupational and speech-language therapy is not a new concept. What was new was the idea of using cavalry horses to help rehabilitate wounded soldiers. Working in partnership with members of the 1st Cavalry Detachment and staff from Brooke Army Medical Center, the Center developed programs specifically designed for the needs of wounded soldiers, selected and trained horses for their new duties, recruited volunteers and soon welcomed its first returning soldiers.



In 2009, the Center installed a new riding trail for the program and up stepped the **Sertoma Club of Georgetown** to ensure the new "Trail of Heroes" included a visual tribute to these returning heroes. Over the years, the Club had developed a longstanding relationship with the Ride On Center for Kids, providing financial assistance that included funds for equipment to help the Center serve children with speech and hearing needs. So, when the Club learned of plans to install the new Trail of Heroes, its members immediately offered to donate flags for the trail. In March of 2009, the Club formally presented eight flags to the Center, one flag for each of the country's

Armed Services (Air Force, Army, Coast Guard, Marines and Navy), one POW flag, the Texas state flag and, of course, the flag of the United States. The Club also presented the Center's Executive Director Karron Wilson with a flag that had flown over the United States Capital. The flags were installed at the head of the trail, just inside the entrance to the Center, where they flutter in an almost constant gentle breeze, greeting the returning soldiers, volunteers and Center visitors.

While horses are an important part of the hope and healing taking place in the Horses for Heroes program, volunteers play an equally important role. The program is built on the foundation of soldiers helping soldiers and partners each injured soldier with both a horse and a veteran. These veteran volunteers assist as sidewalkers, providing safety, camaraderie and moral support for the injured soldiers. The veteran volunteers also assist with the care and handling of the horses. When the call went out for veterans to volunteer in the program, so many stepped up that the Center is reaching out to injured soldiers in surrounding communities, encouraging them to participate in the Horses for Heroes program.

To qualify for the program, soldiers must have a military related disability, provide a physician referral and be evaluated by a member of the Center's staff. Once accepted into the program, each soldier is given a therapeutic riding plan specifically tailored to the soldier's individual needs.

The Horses for Heroes program is accredited by the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association and its model has quickly spread across the country, from Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, DC to San Diego, California. And in 2009, the Sertoma Club of Georgetown recognized Nancy Krenek's accomplishments, naming her the Club's Service to Mankind Award recipient.

To learn more about Horses for Heroes, visit www.rockride.org. And to learn more about the Sertoma Club of Georgetown, go to www.georgetownsertoma.org.