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Veterans program more than horseplay outside Lakeville

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Wayne Koski is clearly in pain as he puts his left foot in the stirrup and ever so slowly lifts his right leg over the massive back of Toby, a white Percheron.

But he sits tall, straight and proud in the saddle as Craig Swanson, director of the veterans program at Majestic Hills Ranch, just outside of Lakeville, leads Toby around an outdoor arena. Fifteen or 20 minutes later, the routine is reversed. A winded Koski rests for a time before making his way down the three steps of the platform that got him up to the horse's level in the first place.

Koski comes to the ranch every week. He is one of the veterans participating in the ranch's Heroes on Horseback program, which offers therapeutic riding and equine-assisted therapy free of charge to emotionally or physically injured military personnel.

Koski, 52, of West St. Paul, has mixed connective tissue disease, autoimmune diseases, and lupus, he explained. He served in the Army for 27 years, lastly as a chief warrant officer-4 before being medically retired in 2009. He served in Iraq in 2006-07 where, he believes, he was exposed to some chemical that caused his health problems.

"I've been a train wreck ever since," he said. "I used to be a big, strapping guy. I never asked anybody for help. Now I need help with everything.

"This therapy has been the best thing for me because it stretches joints and muscles and connective tissues."

Added Swanson:

"He doesn't know it, but he's getting stronger, too. Some of those muscles are not just loosening, they're strengthening. He's gaining a little bit more flexibility and range of motion in the joints."

The first time he got on a horse, Koski said, "I couldn't get off. I couldn't move my legs enough to get off.

"I like being out here in the fresh air, too."

Majestic Hills is a bucolic, 111-acre spread dotted with rolling hills, cornfields, white fences and a slew of horses happily grazing in green pastures.

There are 46 horses; 18 work in the therapeutic riding programs.

Owner Kim Howard started a riding program for children with disabilities in 1997 after her granddaughter Jackie was born



Twenty-seven-year Army veteran Wayne Koski rode in a therapeutic horseback session led by Craig Swanson, right, director of the veterans program at Majestic Hills Ranch in Lakeville. Koski suffers from mixed connective tissue disease. At left is foundation secretary/treasurer Carol Meagher.

Courtney Perry, Special to the Star Tribune



The ranch also has other therapeutic programs, designed for kids and adults. At left, 5-year-old Ava Champe headed from the barn to the riding arena. Majestic Hills runs its programs from May to October.

Courtney Perry, Special to the Star Tribune

TO LEARN MORE

For information about participating or volunteering in the Heroes on Horseback program, call Craig Swanson at 612-759-1840 or Larry Johnson at 612-669-8846 or visit www.majestichillsranch.com.

with myriad life-threatening illnesses. The family was told that the girl would never walk and likely wouldn't live past toddlerhood. But within weeks of getting up on a horse, the girl was growing stronger. She learned to walk and talk and later to drive. She lived until age 19.

Today, the ranch works with people ages 2 to 25 with mental impairments, cerebral palsy, autism and other special needs.

Teresa Tollerud of Burnsville has a 15-year-old daughter, Emily, in an advanced class at the ranch. Emily has developmental delays and scoliosis. The riding helps the teenager strengthen her stomach and back muscles.

"She really looks forward to going every week," Tollerud said. "I've seen her bloom in confidence."

Majestic Hills runs therapeutic riding programs from May to October -- it has only outdoor arenas -- and needs about \$250,000 a year for food, veterinary care and upkeep for its horses.

Participants in the children's program pay \$40 to \$45 a session for a seven-week term. Organizers are trying to keep the veterans program free as a way to give something back to those who gave something to their country. Reaching out has been difficult, though, partly because of privacy rules and red tape surrounding military hospitals and homes, said Larry Johnson, vice president of the ranch's board of directors and an Army veteran himself.

The Minneapolis and Hastings Veterans Homes and the Minneapolis Veterans Medical Center try to bring some residents and patients to the ranch weekly, but a lot depends on whether those institutions have transportation and staff available, Johnson said. Turnover at all three places is high, he said.

Johnson speaks whenever he can to groups such as the Minnesota Assistance Council for Veterans and the Paralyzed Veterans of Minnesota to try to reach shut-ins who could benefit from the program but might not know about it.

Until now, most military participants have had traumatic brain injuries, post-traumatic stress disorder or chemical dependency issues. Veterans organizations have donated money for a hydraulic lift and a specially equipped carriage so that veterans who are paralyzed or missing a limb can participate, too.

Most of the 100 or so veterans Swanson has worked with have been from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. One of them, age 27, had been in a coma for six months and had spent four years in the hospital after suffering a traumatic brain injury in an explosion.

"He rode with us the entire summer of 2011," Swanson said. "He graduated from here and the VA Medical Center in October and got his driver's license in his last month."

Another fellow who was chosen as Rider of the Year last year had post-traumatic stress disorder and a closed-head brain injury from the release of a poisonous gas aboard a Navy ship. The man had grown up riding horses on a ranch in Nebraska, herding and working with cattle. But when he got to Majestic Hills, he didn't want anything to do with riding, Swanson said.

"When he came out here, he was like, 'I'll groom them but I don't want to ride,'" Swanson said. "He knew what kind of balance he didn't have. He wound up, after about three times out here, saying 'Maybe I will get on a horse.' His balance was extremely difficult, but by the end of the summer he was leading a trail ride and was pretty much an independent rider. He'd just come so far."

The veterans get a lot more than exercise at Majestic Hills. Camaraderie, a sense of belonging, confidence and self-esteem, Johnson, Koski and Swanson answered when asked about the non-physical benefits.

"Belonging to something, belonging to a group is something military people enjoy because all our careers we belonged to something -- the Army, national defense," Koski said. "Now that we're retired, we still want to belong to something, to be needed, to be wanted, just to have someplace to go."

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