

Ironstone Farm offers veterans change and, soon, a center

About 30 veterans come to Ironstone Farm in Andover, Mass., each week for many reasons: for fun, for equine-assisted activities and learning, to contribute to a nonprofit that helps over 400 people a week. But perhaps the most popular reason is to feed a little filly named Rose, born this spring.

While Ironstone Farm uses 200 volunteers a week to help take care of its 35 horses and run its therapeutic riding programs that support children with special needs and others, it is the veterans who have this most coveted role of taking care of little Rose and her mom Columbia.

Now, a new connection with Dick George, the Screaming Eagles and Home Base should open the doors to greater opportunities for weekend retreats.

The Ironstone Farm Veterans Experience is meant to help veterans who have experienced trauma to adjust to their non-combat or post-military lives. It has positively impacted the lives of hundreds of veterans, from homeless veterans who went on to find homes and jobs, to combat veterans who were already in college programs.

“One veteran was living on the rocks, on the beach,” says Kevin O’Brien, VA peer specialist. “This helps them deal with other things going on.”

Since the creation of this program five years ago, however, the veterans have found ways to help out the nonprofit at the same time. Many veterans volunteer their time separately from the Veterans Experience, either to help care for the horses or to assist with the nonprofit’s therapeutic riding that improves the walking and talking of children with special needs. It’s a unique community that gives something rewarding to everyone.

“I’ve fed and watered the horses at 7 in the morning,” chuckles Tony Pereira, Army Airborne veteran. “I look forward to this and I know the other veterans I come with do, too. It’s magic.” He says the experience is great for young combat veterans.

The program was created by University of New Hampshire Kinesiology Professor Pam McPhee; and the late Paul Smith, Ph.D, a faculty member of Prescott College and director of Centaur Leadership Services. It was originally adapted for veterans with the help of a former Navy Seal.

The program is further adapted to fit into the experience, interests and talents of the people involved in each small group. During the last year, Nathan “Cowboy” Tidwell has introduced veterans to many aspects of horsemanship. Some of those interested, such as Pereira, have tried western riding, and even roping while riding a horse. Tidwell is organizing a veterans’ drill team, a group that performs synchronized horseback riding set to music.

Often, veterans overcome their fears, including a fear of horses, and this gives them a new



Ironstone Farm Executive Director Deedee O'Brien and former 101st Airborne Division Paratrooper Dick George pose in the nonprofit farm's indoor riding arena.

ability to face other problems.

“It gives you confidence. These are big horses. You see people so intimidated and then they learn, ‘I can do this,’” said Tidwell, Ironstone’s equine operations director. “It also gives them purpose. I believe they like to come help because they feel needed, and wanted – and they are. We welcome all the help we can get! Everybody wants to feel appreciated. When they come here and do this, they feel special.”

Ironstone uses the interactions with horses in many ways. The horses may mirror the veterans’ actions, and the veterans can see themselves in the horses. Other times, veterans may see that how the horses respond to their actions is how people have been responding to them.

“These horses are so natural, so real, they react to things you are not even aware you are doing. It makes the veterans more acute to the fact that ‘It’s not so much what I say it’s what I say *and what I do*,’” says Chris James, a social worker from the Boston VA. “Once they can apply it to [interacting with] people, they can better understand their own place in life and more importantly how they can affect the lives of other people. In some cases, they can then correct those things they can correct and accept the ones they can’t.”

Creating an on-site veterans center

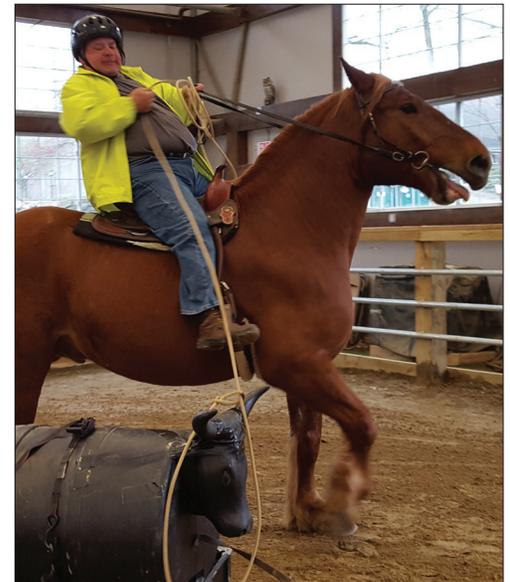
Ironstone’s weekly experiences have expanded from one hour to two, because of interest from the veterans. The next step for Ironstone is to turn its original farmhouse into a Veterans Center, so that veterans and family members attending weekend retreats could stay for the weekend at the Andover, Mass. farm. This will allow for a more immersive retreat.

“I told my guys about it, and they can’t wait. They even asked ‘Do they need any help? We could volunteer!’” said Goldie Lewis, peer sup-

port specialist at the Boston VA. “The longer they can stay and help with everyday things, it will help that much more.

“A lot of these guys went to combat and suffer from PTSD. Medicines don’t work, just talking to a therapist (alone) isn’t what they really need either. It helps to talk, but they need to build up trust in something. The horses seem to take their emotional pain away. It’s an amazing thing to see and I love being a part of it.”

To learn more about the experience, visit www.IronstoneFarm.org/veterans-experience.



‘COMBAT VETERANS I KNOW, COME HERE AND – THEY CAN BREATHE. IT’S LIKE BEING IN THE COUNTRY, BUT YOU’RE 5 MINUTES FROM THE HIGHWAY!’

**TONY PEREIRA,
ARMY AIRBORNE**



'IT HELPS TO TALK, BUT THEY NEED TO BUILD UP TRUST IN SOMETHING. THE HORSES SEEM TO TAKE THEIR EMOTIONAL PAIN AWAY. IT'S AN AMAZING THING TO SEE AND I LOVE BEING PART OF IT.'

**GOLDIE LEWIS, ARMY
PEER SUPPORT SPECIALIST, BOSTON VA**



'EVERY SINGLE ONE OF THEM, TO A MAN OR TO A WOMAN SAY THAT 'THIS IS THE BEST TIME THAT I'VE SPENT IN MY ENTIRE VA EXPERIENCE.'

**CHRIS JAMES, NAVY
MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK, BOSTON VA**
NOTE: THE FARMHOUSE THAT WILL BECOME A VETERANS CENTER IS BEHIND JAMES

ABOUT IRONSTONE FARM AND ITS NONPROFIT

Challenge Unlimited at Ironstone Farm began as a nonprofit focused on offering physical and occupational therapy and therapeutic riding to children and adults with special needs. It has expanded over many years to offer supportive programs for a diverse group of people, from people diagnosed with cancer to combat veterans. The approach of Executive Director Deedee O'Brien and the late Dick Donovan – the veteran who founded Ironstone Farm – always has been to seek new ways that Ironstone's beautiful 19-acre site, its indoor and outdoor facilities and its staff and animals can further improve the lives of people.

"Ironstone is very generous. It seems like any time you have an idea, Deedee and Cowboy [the director of equine operations] are all for it," says Kevin O'Brien, Army veteran and VA peer specialist.

Five years ago, Ironstone began to offer its Veterans Experience as a free-to-veterans weekend retreat. Ironstone now offers both a weekend retreat and a weekly Veterans Experience where veterans have important, hands-on roles in learning about the farm's horses and taking care of them. They were the first to meet Rose, a filly born at the farm this spring.

Next up? Ironstone plans to turn its original farmhouse into a Veterans Center where servicemen, servicewomen and family members can stay while they attend weekend retreats frequently described as life-changing.

Deedee O'Brien has been the executive director and a driving force at Challenge Unlimited, the 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization at Ironstone Farm, since its incorporation in 1983. People interested in learning more, attending or supporting the program can contact her at Ironstone Farm at 978-475-4056 or ironstone1960@gmail.com. People also can reach out to Neil Fater, marketing director, by calling or emailing neilfater@challengeunlimited.org.

**Visit Ironstone online at
www.IronstoneFarm.org/veterans-experience**