

THE EQUUS EFFECT AT WORK

Sharon horse farm offers healing to veterans

BY RUTH EPSTEIN
REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

Dutch and Tango stood quietly Saturday, listening to speakers give testimony about how the horses have helped provide life-changing therapy to military veterans returning from combat.

Jane Strong and David Sanatore stood with their four-legged companions in a round pen, surrounded by vast rolling meadows and majestic mountainsides on Strong's Sharon farm. They were hosting an open house to explain the nonprofit program they run called the Equus Effect.

Strong told a reporter that when she was younger, she was a competitive rider and horses were a big part of her life, but she moved on to other interests and for a long while wasn't involved with them. In 2002, she got back on a horse after 35 years.

"I felt I'd come home," she said. "The trick was to find how to have them in my life."

She turned to natural horsemanship, in which riders communicate what they want through body language and intention. She never believed horses had anything to teach her, but she realized there were ways to communicate with them without using force. "I could see what was happening to people by working with horses."

STRONG STUDIED with Linda Kohanov and became a certified instructor in equine-facilitated learning. A few years ago, she started inviting veterans to interact with her horses. Men and women veterans now participate in the five-week sessions, which aid in accelerating the process of readjustment back to civilian life for them and their families. This year, 75 took part and there is a waiting list.

She said there are many parallels between horses and veterans. Vets are vigilant, which is part of post-traumatic stress disorder. Horses are scared, too.

Strong, who with Sanatore has completed extensive research and course study, said the program's first assessment is about how the person deals with the issue of trust. "Unlike a combat mission, this activity is not just about getting something done," she said. "They are developing relationships and sensitivity while accomplishing something."

The veterans don't ride the horses, but work on the ground, eye-to-eye. They start by walking the horses



PHOTOS BY RUTH EPSTEIN REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

Jane Strong, who operates the Equus Effect on her Sharon farm, talks about the program during an open house Saturday. With her is licensed social worker David Sanatore, who works with Strong on using horses to help veterans readjust to civilian life.



Mike, a veteran who preferred to remain anonymous, tells a gathering Saturday in Sharon how the Equus Effect program has helped him 'learn to live again.' His wife, Kathy, attested to the fact that he is a much-changed man due to the program.

TO KNOW MORE

The Equus Effect is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization. Visit TheEquusEffect.org or call 860-364-5363.

around the pen, then learn how to exercise them using their bodies for instruction. That part teaches patience and subtlety, Strong said.

When grooming the horses, the veterans begin to relax and focus on something other than themselves. The horses love being groomed and so they, too, show signs of relaxing.

"Most of the veterans were young and impressionable when they went into the service," Strong said. "They missed years of development that in civilian life may have taken more time. With the

rote and rigor needed in the service, they missed cultural development. We teach them to use their bodies differently; to soften energy. They often translate that into their lives and see success in their relationships with families, at school and work. We also believe if you change your body language, you change your mind and can better manage your emotions."

DURING SATURDAY'S PROGRAM, Sanatore, a clinical social worker, said the Equus program tries to eliminate words and have the veterans

communicate with their bodies. The animals can then feel what the individuals are feeling.

"The horses are saying they trust them," Strong said. "All of us are not sure how worthy or trustworthy we are. If a horse is saying it, it means you can trust yourself. Many vets take their own lives because they don't trust themselves."

Several alumni of the veterans program were at Saturday's open house, eager to describe how Equus has helped them. To protect their privacy, they were introduced by only their first names.

Mike served in several branches of the military and retired in 2010 after a long career. "Things became difficult," he said. "I put my wife through hell. This program and the horses taught me how to learn to live again." His wife, Kathy, attested to the positive change in his personality as a result of participating in the program.

Tim said he came all the way from Reno to be a part of Saturday's program because he is so passionate about it. After leaving the service, he found he'd sit home alone and drink a lot. Equus helped him integrate into society and become comfortable with himself. "In the military it's about forcing your will, which doesn't translate to day-to-day living in a civilized world. I'm here to tell you I believe in this program. It's valid and it works."