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## SH Riding Club: service for those who served

By Susan Kelejian

Statistics are bleak: according to the Department of Veterans Affairs, in 2012 an average of 18 veterans commits suicide nationally on a daily basis. It has been hypothesized that many do for myriad reasons, but the phenomenon is largely due to diagnosed or undiagnosed illnesses such as clinical depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI) in combination with substance abuse, socio-economic factors, and fear of asking for help. And there are further challenges: getting veterans to commit to therapeutic sessions has been difficult. The effects of PTSD, with or without TBI, can often have causal effects that lead soldiers to want to end their lives. Recently there have been studies that show due to explosions, TBI is more prevalent than previously believed, and that it may also be a cause of PTSD.

Saddles for Soldiers, a program designed specifically by Shadow Hills Riding Club (SHRC) to assist veterans and their families in coping with the traumas and stressors of returning from combat, long term depression, reestablishing life skills and readjustment into civilian life by the use of horses, will benefit directly from the hard work that was put in from the volunteers on Veterans Day. One of the main focuses in 2013 will be to collect research for a greater reduction in Veteran suicides with the use of Equine Assisted Activities and Therapies (EAAT). Shadow Hills Riding Club is a nonprofit equine therapeutic organization located at Shadow Hills Equestrian Center. On Veterans Day, nearly 170 volunteers spent their day building, cleaning, painting, and organizing for the Saddles for Soldiers program. The throngs of good Samaritans came from Volunteer Los Angeles, an organization that provides a direct connection from a centralized volunteer base to non-profit agencies throughout Los Angeles to provide service and implement needed change for our communities.

But the community partnership doesn't stop there. Woodbury University, a college located in Burbank and specializing in architecture, has a project on the ranch building temporary housing units to be used by Veterans for healing retreats, weekend intensives, holistic programs and more. On Veterans Day, Volunteer Los Angeles also assisted in some of the decking construction with the Woodbury students.

A few weeks prior to this event, a public service announcement focusing on equine therapies and Veterans was filmed for the Saddles for Soldiers program, which was the recipient of a grant given by Women in Film, who are estimating that it will run as a national commercial (PSA) by January 2013.

Throughout the day, volunteers were seen painting and cleaning the barn, equipment in the arena, weeding for a future garden, replanting, and providing much needed services that ranch owner and program director, Johnny Higginson needs. *“We are all here to serve those people who served our country,”* Higginson said to the Veterans Day crowd. *“We can't do this (program) without the generous help from our community, from my staff and our program volunteers. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts.”*

Using horses for healing purposes is becoming a viable intervention, now recognized by the Federal Government because of programs such as Shadow Hills Riding Club and many others across the country. Empirical evidence of such modality, though sparse, is proving particular benefits to Veterans due partially because of the stigma associated with getting help, and the fact that equine therapy is creating a human/animal bond, often a first step in reintegration to social norms. The sessions include an equine specialist and a mental health professional.

Also doing work at the Shadow Hills Riding Club are USC interns, who are obtaining their hours for their Masters in Social work degrees. Saddles for Soldiers is clearly seeing the benefits of community partnering, and, in turn, can provide the much needed service to underserved populations such as our country's veterans. What a great example of working together to create a better society, by giving back to those who give to us.

To all the men and women who serve our country, we know that a "thank you" is never enough, though we hope our actions will set an example of a greater thanks, a deeper understanding to what some of have to live with, and a way of saying, "we want to give back by paying it forward."

The philosophy and mission of Shadow Hills Riding Club is to implement an expansive therapeutic equine program using horses to facilitate healing, learning and growth. Their vision is dedicated to providing exceptional equine programs to cultivate growth and healing through self-actualization and awareness resulting in healthier lives for individuals and their communities.