



P. KEVIN MORLEY/TIMES-DISPATCH

Navy veteran George Minton is helped from his wheelchair and onto a horse at Lonesome Dove Equestrian Center by Clint Arrington (foreground), April Yount (right) and Paul Sabbatini (left).

Horseback healing

An equestrian center in Powhatan provides therapy for veterans

BY JEREMY SLAYTON
Times-Dispatch Staff Writer

Steven Williams survived two deployments to Iraq. He saw the worst that war has to offer — bullets flying at him and bombs exploding around him.

But it was a near-fatal car wreck last April that resulted in the amputation of his left leg. The ensuing recovery was hard for the Marine who served with the 22nd

Marine Expeditionary Unit.

Last fall, he experienced something that began to lift his spirits — a trip to the Lonesome Dove Equestrian Center.

There, he rode a horse for the first time. He returned yesterday, wearing a big smile full of pride as he rode Paul, a 9-year old Clydesdale/saddlebred cross. Even an emergency dismount at the end of his ride wasn't able to erase the pure joy he experienced.

Williams said the program offered at Lonesome Dove is vital to his, and other veterans', recovery.

"It brings us back and let's us know we can still do these things," said Williams, who now

wears a prosthetic leg. "It keeps my spirits high, even though I'm walking with a quad cane and I've got one leg."

The driving force behind Lonesome Dove is Clint Arrington, a stonemason who is constantly in motion. The equestrian center, at 6137 Old Buckingham Road in Powhatan County, opened in 2008 to serve the special needs of veterans through therapeutic riding and equine-related activities.

It's a place where there is no such thing as can't and disabilities aren't limitations.

The message Arrington hopes to impart on the veterans is sim-

TE Want to go for a ride?

A trip to the Lonesome Dove Equestrian Center can lift a veteran's spirits. Go to TimesDispatch.com, keyword: gallery.

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To donate or volunteer

Lonesome Dove Equestrian Center is funded solely by private donations.

Address: Lonesome Dove Equestrian Center, 6137 Old Buckingham Road, Powhatan, VA 23139

Phone: (804) 357-9524

Web: LDEquestrianCenter.com

Rides

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ple — courage, confidence and hope.

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Yesterday, about 10 veterans from McGuire Veterans Affairs Medical Center and Sitter and Barfoot Veterans Care Center took turns riding Paul and Mary Grace, a 10-year-old quarter horse.

The veterans suffer from a variety of physical and mental disabilities, but still, they can experience the therapeutic release that comes from riding a horse. Therapists who work with the veterans on a regular basis say the benefits of this program are many.

"It has physical, emotional, cognitive and social benefits," said April Yount, a recreational therapist at McGuire. "The patients really build their self-esteem."

The safety of the riders and horses is of the utmost concern. Each of the volunteers is trained, and Arrington goes over safety tips with each rider, said Barbara Minnicks, a recreational therapist at McGuire.

Each rider has a volunteer leading the horse and two



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George Minton waits his turn to ride a horse at Lonesome Dove Equestrian Center in Powhatan County. Minton, 79, served in Korea.

more walking beside the horse as a safety net should the horse need settling or the veteran needs assistance. The therapists maintain a watchful eye as their patients ride.

It takes a docile horse to handle the different riders that sit in the saddle. That defines Paul and Mary Grace, said volunteer Sherry Newark.

"They're excellent with the riders, [and] they're very forgiving," she said. "If a rider is not balanced, most horses, that would irritate them. But these, they just take it in stride."

For the veterans, it's a few moments of escape from their problems. As they sit astride the horses, the veterans no longer need the wheelchair or cane that accompa-

nies them in everyday life. Even problems with eyesight don't hold them back.

"There are a lot of people that are hurting for one reason or another," said Navy veteran James Williams.

But once a veteran gets on a horse, "everything just leaves your head," he said.

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