

Veterans retreat founded in Central Oregon

By Diane Goble
Correspondent

It has been the dream of Alison Perry for six years to create a place where veterans could come to heal, and find purpose and meaning in their lives. Perry, a licensed professional counselor and military family member, has a vision for a working ranch, evolved out of her six years' experience working directly with veterans working on the PTSD clinical team at the Portland VA Medical Center and Bend VA Clinic in Central Oregon.

Perry has had several family members in the military over the years, including her brother who deployed for the invasion of Iraq in 2003 as an Apache helicopter pilot, completed two more tours as a MEDEVAC pilot, and still active duty Army. But it was one young man in particular she encountered who was severely traumatized by his experiences in combat and struggling with psychotic symptoms, hospitalized in the psychiatric ward of a large medical center, that caused her to envision a different approach to healing our veterans: "I wish we had

a sheep ranch out east where we could send these guys..."

In 2007 Perry began working at the Bend VA Clinic, where she collaborated with a psychologist, Ron Kokes, who implemented a community-oriented approach to healing, including the creation of four groups of combat veterans, comprised primarily of Vietnam veterans.

"I saw how critical community was for veterans," she said.

She began to see differences in the ways people handle the trauma of war experiences depending on their age group.

"It's very different for people in their 60s and people in their 20s," she says, "so treatment can't be one-size-fits-all."

Traumatic experiences can erupt at various points across an individual's lifespan.

Perry often got to be the first person to hear veterans' stories upon returning home from war, and often Vietnam veterans talking about their experiences for the very first time in forty or so years. This had a significant impact on her understanding of how different generations have been affected by their experiences.



PHOTO BY DIANE GOBLE

A Central Oregon ranch will help form a sense of community for Sisters Country veterans.

It was during her tenure at the Bend VA Clinic and her close work with combat veterans of all ages that Perry developed an interest in end-of-life care for veterans. She began studying, and completed programs with Sacred Art of Living Center in Bend and expanded her dream to combine her idea of a working ranch, or "PTSD ranch," with supportive housing for terminally ill or aged veterans in need of specialized care.

This week that dream to

restore purpose and spirit for veterans of all ages is coming to Central Oregon. With the help of a private investor, and with a loan approval in hand, the nonprofit Central Oregon Veterans Ranch is ready to move forward with its plans for renovating existing structures and developing a working farm and ranch on 19 acres between Redmond and Bend, off 61st Street.

Veteran contractors are lining up to help remodel and build other needed structures.

There is an existing home, garage, barn, greenhouse, cross-fencing and 12 acres of irrigation. The group intends to raise a heritage breed of sheep called Navajo Churro, which veterans will care for while helping to preserve the breed. Products will be created from the sheep, including wool and meat, which will be sold to raise money.

Veterans will take part in developing and maintaining

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