Celebrities and supporters converge for benefit of local military veterans

BY NICK ROSENBERGER Redmond Spokesman

Under the soft golden light of Juniper Golf Course's event hall, veterans, organizers, supporters and celebrities gathered on June 25 to raise money and awareness for the Central Oregon Veterans Ranch — a 19-acre working farm outside Redmond that works to restore "purpose and spirit" to military veterans.

Organized by COVR founder Alison Perry and Suzanne DeLaurentiis, an actress and film producer, gala attendees gathered dressed in suits, cocktail dresses, cowboy hats and military finery with medals glinting in the light. Everyone was there for a single purpose: To support the ranch and veterans healing from traumatic experiences while serving.

"It's really about building

"It's really about building community and building a support base, a support network, for veterans post-military," said Perry.



Nick Rosenberger/Redmond Spokesman

Alison Perry speaks at the Central Oregon Veterans Ranch gala at the Juniper Golf Course in Redmond on June 25.

Perry began working with veterans as a trauma therapist in 2005, two years after her brother deployed to Iraq. While with the Department of Veteran's Af-

fairs, she developed a passion for addressing combat trauma across the lifespan and looking into what trauma looks like for someone who is 22, 42, 62 or 92

years old.

"It never goes away," she said. "It just changes."

In 2007, while working with a young veteran who ended up in the psychiat-

ric ward of the Portland VA Medical Center, Perry had a vision of starting a sheep farm where they could send veterans to work the land, sleep under the stars and be in a community of people who were facing similar struggles.

This dream became a reality in 2015 when the ranch opened just south of Redmond. Among other things, it offers peer and PTSD support groups and a veteran-only AA meeting.

"It's that's their little piece of the world here where they can connect with each other," said Leslie Ristina, a board member for the ranch.

Unless you've served, you will be an outsider to some degree, Ristina said. The ranch, however, offers a place where veterans can drop their guard around others who have been through similar experiences.

"What we're really focused on is post-traumatic growth," Perry said. "We don't want to just save a veteran's life, we want to help them find their new life."

Veterans are welcome to come and go as they please — volunteering if they're stressed or need to talk to

somebody or connect with others. Thursday is a volunteer work day and acts as a great way for interested veterans to start getting involved

"We see transformation happening with our veterans," Perry said. "We see them rediscovering themselves, a new sense of hope, a sense of purpose."

The gala was also attended by actors Michael Paré, who is best known for the 1989 film Eddie and the Cruisers, and John Savage, who acted in the 1978 film The Deer Hunter, alongside Robert De Niro and Christopher Walken.

"I'm an actor," Paré said.
"My credits mean nothing compared to these guys."

With the success of the gala, the ranch is looking forward to the future. They are working towards growing the property and broadening outreach efforts and peer support services. And, according to Ristina, they plan to start a house for end-of-life veterans on the ranch.

"It's a lifeline," Perry said.
"It's a community. It's a tribe."

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Community choir back in tune after 2-year pause

agical. That was the word many of us used to describe our experience in the fall 2019 when the Redmond Community Choir first began.

A look back

The summer 2019 continuing education catalog for Central Oregon Community College included notice of a new class that was being offered in the fall: the Redmond Community Choir. The class was open to adult amateur singers of all skill levels and best of all, no audition was required.

Ken Piarulli, the choir director, is a lifelong musician with a master's degree in music education from Syracuse University. He had sung in and directed several choral groups, and he had performed professionally as a jazz pianist. I briefly wondered why someone with his credentials would be willing to assemble a choir of unseasoned amateurs, then put on a community concert after just a dozen practice sessions.

Although I was a little nervous at the prospect of having to sing at the concert, I didn't want to pass up this wonderful opportunity. I clicked on the link and signed up. Another choir member later told me, "Literally, I jumped up and ran to the computer to register."

The choir

I walked into a full room on the first night of practice. The excitement was palpable as we waited in line for our name tags and sheet music. The choir members were directed to their appropriate sections, and after a brief introduction, our new choir got down to business. Before we knew it, two hours had flown by, and the evening was over. Every Monday I looked forward to walking into choir practice and joining a group of like-minded music lovers who were willing to work hard to make good music.

Leadership

Ken's leadership and dedication helped ensure our success. It was a steep learning curve for some of the choir members, so he offered classes before our rehearsals for those who needed help reading music. One of the choir members expressed the sentiments that many of us felt, that Ken "creates an environment where he makes people want to do their very best for him." And we did. At least one choir member took voice lessons; another took piano lessons. We showed up on time, and we gave it our all.

The concert

With the Dec. 15 concert

How to join the choir
Visit www.coc.edu and
click on the personal enrichment section of the community education tab, then
click on the choir's picture
under special programs.
Click on the "registration
open" button, and then "add

date looming, there was still some work to be done. The dress rehearsal was on Friday, Dec. 13, and that's when it really sunk in that we would be performing before a live audience. Yikes. We practiced getting on and off stage, then sang selected song sections as the crew did light and sound checks. When we were done, there was nothing more to do

but show up, warm up, and perform.

On the day of the concert, as we lined up and walked onstage the audience began clapping, and they continued clapping until the last person was in position — what a welcome! Ken greeted the audience, turned back to the choir, raised his hands, and with the first downbeat we were off and running. Before we knew it, our concert was in the books, as we finished up with the audience participating in a Christmas carol sing-a-long.

Our brand-new, never-having-sung-together choir had learned and performed more than a dozen songs in twelve short weeks. We were proud of what we had done, and we were looking forward to seeing what we could accomplish when we got together again

spring term. However, there were...

Complications

In March 2020, a week before we were to begin rehearsals, the world went into Covid lockdown. Even as restrictions eased, it would have been nearly impossible to sing with people six feet apart from each other and wearing masks. Our choir was on hold, and would remain on hold throughout

2020, 2021 and spring 2022. However, there is good news.

We're back

Beginning in fall of 2022, the Redmond Community Choir will be back in business. The first day of rehearsal will be Monday, Sept. 19, with a Christmas concert scheduled for Sunday, Dec. 11. Registration has already begun and the

choir is nearing capacity.
Along with magical, there

was another word that some of us used to describe our experience with the Redmond Community Choir — joy. For all the hard work we put into the choir, it never felt like work because it was so much fun. And I for one can't wait to join old friends and new music-lovers this fall, and to re-experience the magic and joy of making music together.

– Pamela Lesznar is a member of the Redmond Community Choir.



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