

Veterans

Continued from A1

Being around other veterans, he said, made him realize he was not alone.

"I've gone from (Veterans Affairs) putting me on five different pills to try and keep me sane, to now I'm not on anything anymore, because I've been able to work through the trauma," Shaw said. "It's really helped me to let go of my anger."

'MONASTERY FOR VETERANS'

According to the American Psychological Association, veterans are 1.5 times more likely to die from suicide than non-veterans.

Reasons for this may include exposure to trauma, stress and difficulties reintegrating into civilian life, leading to greater social isolation and loneliness. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported 130 suicide deaths per day in 2019, of which 17 were veterans — a rate of about 13%.

Alison Perry, a licensed professional counselor, founded the Central Oregon Veterans Ranch in 2014. She summed up her vision as "regenerating soil and souls."

"I kind of describe the ranch as a monastery for veterans," she said. "When you are constantly hyper-vigilant and constantly activated, it's exhausting. When veterans come here, they are able to let their guard down."

Perry, a licensed counselor, comes from a military family. Her brother, Todd, was an Apache helicopter pilot for the Army during the 2003 invasion of Iraq. His job was to support ground troops with gunships from the air.

When Todd Perry returned from his first deployment in 2004, Alison saw her brother struggle with "moral injury," referring to actions that violate one's moral values leading to guilt, shame and psychological trauma.

That is when Alison said she felt called to work with veterans. She spent three years as a trauma therapist for the Portland VA Medical Center and later transferred to the Bend VA Clinic to work for another three years.

Veterans returning home often struggle with sleeplessness, recurring nightmares and other symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, Perry said.

But she noticed something happening on a deeper level. Her patients were coming home without an identity or a mission, disoriented and disconnected from civilian life.

In one case, Perry said a 22-year-old Iraq veteran who had been drugged and sexually assaulted by a combat buddy was being held in the psychiatric ward at the Portland VA hospital under lockdown, where he was throwing furniture and threatening staff.

Perry said it hit her in a flash, how this environment was actually re-traumatizing her patient.

"I looked at my colleague, and I said, 'I wish we had a sheep ranch out east where we could send these guys when they got home, where they could work on the land, sleep under the stars and be in a community of other veterans,'" Perry said.

RESTORATION OF PURPOSE

As a newly formed nonprofit, the Central Oregon Veterans Ranch had just \$1,600 in the bank in October 2014 when Perry signed a contract to buy the 19-acre former sheep ranch roughly 9 miles outside Redmond.

The sellers wanted \$10,000 in non-refundable earnest money to take the property off the market while Perry and her board of directors searched for an investor.

What happened next was astonishing, Perry said. In a matter of months, the group was able to raise \$40,000 entirely from community donations.

"That's what showed me this was going to work," Perry said.

Today, Central Oregon Veterans Ranch owns the land outright. In recent years, veterans have worked to rehabilitate 12 acres of irrigated pasture, plant-



Nick Rosenberger/EO Media Group

Robert Shaw takes apart an irrigation pump Nov. 2 in preparation for winter at the Central Oregon Veterans Ranch outside Redmond.

ing native grasses and installing new sprinklers with financial support from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.

The ranch is also home to a community garden, greenhouse and several types of livestock, including chickens, pigs, sheep and llamas.

All services provided at the ranch are free. Veterans can drop in every Thursday for volunteer days from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. Children are allowed at the ranch on Saturdays only, from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. Registration is required in advance to attend support groups.

Eventually, Perry said she hopes to adapt the farmhouse to specialize in end-of-life care for veterans.

Adrian De La Rosa, operations and program manager, said the ranch specializes in regenerative agriculture, using methods to improve the health of plants and soil.

By regenerating the land, it also helps to regenerate the veterans themselves, he said.



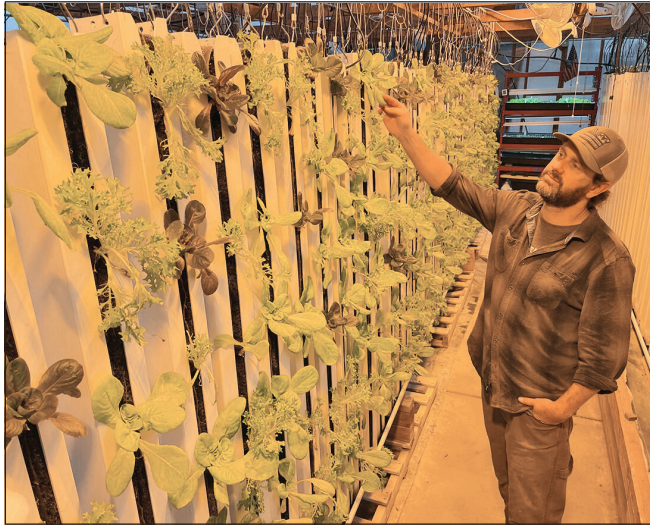
Adrian De La Rosa, operations and program manager at the Central Oregon Veterans Ranch, with a chicken. The ranch has chickens, pigs, llamas and sheep as part of its animal husbandry program.

George Plaven/Capital Press

"You can see that restoration of a purpose again," De La Rosa said. "When you have a veteran and you put them in a situation where they're growing life again, it does something transformative to them."

FARMING AS THERAPY

Orion Carriger, a career horticulturist and greenhouse manager at the ranch, works with veterans to grow lettuce year-



George Plaven/Capital Press

Orion Carriger, greenhouse manager at the Central Oregon Veterans Ranch, displays the vertical farming and hydroponics system, funded by a Specialty Crop Block Grant from the state Department of Agriculture.

round using a hydroponic, vertical farming system.

The system — paid for by a Specialty Crop Block Grant awarded by the Oregon Department of Agriculture — has 240 towers, each 5 feet tall and spaced 6 inches apart. It takes just six weeks from seed to harvest, Carriger said, even in the dead of winter.

The ranch produces 30-50 pounds of lettuce per week, sold to Newport Avenue Market in Bend.

"This is the best lettuce I've ever had in my life," Carriger said. "This stuff just melts in your mouth."

The nearby "Victory Garden" offers additional outdoor space where veterans can grow their own food, including melons, peppers, cucumbers, tomatoes, onions and carrots.

Oct. 8 was the ranch's annual Harvest Festival, where veterans and their families came to reap their bounty. Fresh produce from the gardens is also gathered by the High Desert Food and Farm Alliance in Bend, and donated to local food banks.

Carriger said he sees a growing interest in gardening as a form of therapy for veterans who visit the ranch.

For some, they might come with no farming background, but find calm and happiness in caring for life.

"Maybe the destruction they were involved in (in the military), the natural healing for that is creation," Carriger said.

gap in services for his fellow veterans transitioning out of the military.

Programs offered at the Central Oregon Veterans Ranch are "vessels," he said, to connect veterans with their peers and build networks of support.

"Inevitably, what happens is they start to open up about their traumas," he said.

HELPING TO SAVE OTHERS

For Shaw, his trauma started with a devastating physical injury.

In late 2009, when he was 20, Shaw was stationed at Schofield Barracks Army Base in Hawaii as a heavy equipment operator. One day, while working on a dozer, he shattered his knee in an accident, causing him to no longer be physically fit for duty.

While waiting to receive a medical discharge, Shaw said he became the "punching bag" of his unit. It started with mental

abuse that became physical and sexual.

"I had that mentality that I deserved it," he said. "It destroyed me."

After being discharged at 20% disability, Shaw said he retreated into himself. He quit talking to people, and began drinking heavily when he turned 21. For five years, Shaw said he drank a fifth of Jack Daniels every night, trying to block the painful memories.

The VA put Shaw on five different types of medication, trying to manage his depression and the pain of four knee surgeries.

The cocktail of medicine left him looking and feeling like a zombie, he said.

By his own count, Shaw has attempted suicide seven times. The last attempt, sitting in his truck with the pistol, was what led him to the Central Oregon Veterans Ranch. He now comes 3-4 days a week to work in the pasture, or just sit and reflect by the irrigation pond.

"It settles me down," he said. "I can put a lot of things in perspective during that time."

Watching the pasture come alive with green grass fills him with a sense of pride, he said. And being around other veterans has also helped him to open back up, knowing he can talk about what happened without being judged.

"I'd like to say, for any veteran who's hurting, you're not alone. There is a place for you to come heal," he said. "I've gotten to the point in my life where my goal anymore is to help save other veterans. That keeps me going every day."

A documentary about the Central Oregon Veterans Ranch, titled "Cover Me: The Path to Purpose," directed by Dale Fabrigar and featuring Shaw, will premiere in early 2023.

Perry, the ranch's founder, said she is now hearing from veterans in other states who are interested in adopting her model.

"This environment facilitates growth," she said. "It's transforming lives."

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