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Wednesday, November 16, 2016

The Journal **B1**

A dollar to a doughnut

Last week, I interviewed Maj. Clarence "Del" Williams. I'd met him previously when I'd covered charity events for the Lewis G. Watkins detachment of the Marine Corps League.

But 10 minutes into the interview, I realized I had much more to learn about Del.

He grew up in Georgia and enlisted in the Marines shortly after graduating from high school. It was his best option, since employers were reluctant to hire young men who could be drafted at any moment.

After several years at Parris Island, he realized a desk job was definitely easier than running a full-fledged farm in rural Georgia — and he wasn't

too keen on taking his chances at a cotton mill. So he stuck around for the long haul.

Once he earned the status of officer, he deployed for his first of three tours of duty in Vietnam. Looking into Del's eyes, I could tell there were a lot of stories he didn't want to tell me — and out of respect, I didn't press him. Rather, I let him tell me his story.

What amazed me most was his deepest scar from many years of service. And it wasn't caused by witnessing the horror and tragedy of war, but from being isolated from his unit.

During his last two months of service, he and the 32 men under his command were transferred into other units — like siblings disbursed into different foster families.

He was separated from the men he'd bonded with over the last few years — the ones who had his back no matter what. Suddenly alone, with no sense of anything remotely familiar, he felt lost.

For 47 years, Del walked around in a fog. He spent most of his days sitting in his recliner playing solitaire, and his wife wasn't sure what had happened to the man she'd married.

But when the phone rang and the voice on the other end of the line asked for Lt. Williams, Del's life changed.

One by one, he found out where his men were — not all of them, but many. And Del pressed the reset button — he woke up.

Now he's very active and involved in three veterans groups. He keeps in touch with the men he served with in combat, and with the children of the ones who've passed.

When he got that phone call, it was like he came back to life. It just goes to show how much we, as human beings, need one another.

He said every veteran out there has a story. And he'd bet you a dollar to a doughnut, whether it's another marine, another sailor, another soldier or another airman, that story will always be a part of them.

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COMMON GROUND

STEPHANIE JADRNICKEK



Professional horse trainer and riding instructor Jessica Fry trains Special Olympics athlete Cliffon Moore about how to lead a horse on Tuesday at Hoppin' Horse Farm in Seneca.

PHOTOS BY
STEPHANIE JADRNICKEK |
THE JOURNAL

WILD HEARTS, HAPPY HEARTS

Equine center making a difference for Special Olympics athletes

BY STEPHANIE JADRNICKEK
THE JOURNAL

SENECA — Jessica Fry's lifelong hope of providing therapy through horses took root more than a year ago when she founded Wild Hearts Equine Therapeutic Center.

But last summer, that hope began to blossom.

Special Olympics equestrian coach Karen Buccino contacted Fry with the good news.

"Karen said Special Olympics was interested in coming to our farm, and right there on the phone I cried — and so did she," Fry said. "We'd never met each other before. She'd never been out here to the farm. But we just knew."

As a professional horse trainer and riding instructor, Fry pioneered a therapy approach that gives special-needs children the opportunity to train rescued horses — and the word has spread.

Special Olympics Area 14 director Kathy Schofield said South Carolina Special Olympics has been revamping its equestrian program.

"This is a lost sport that's being brought back," she said. "Equine therapy is a fantastic way to let these athletes bond with an animal. And when you have an athlete make the horse stop or back up, that boosts their confidence level and helps them in their day to day."

As a mother of two Special Olympics athletes, Buccino was determined to find a farm to partner with the equestrian program. Wild Hearts was the perfect match.

So many Special Olympics participants were interested that random names were

drawn from a hat to select the four athletes. Two of the athletes show up on Tuesday mornings at Wild Hearts, located at Hoppin' Horse Farm, and the other two athletes practice on Thursdays.

A team of helpful volunteers is on hand to help with the horses and the athletes. Their work began a few weeks ago when they received training about how to lead the horses, how to be a side walker and what to expect from the athletes.

The first successful Special Olympics equestrian practice took place on Nov. 8. Schofield said the athletes haven't stopped talking about it since.

"They keep saying, 'When are we going back to the farm?', 'This is the horse I led' or 'I made this horse back up,'" she said. "This goes way deeper than just a person and a horse — it's a bond that's unbreakable."

Right now, the athletes are laying a lot of groundwork. They're becoming acquainted with the horses, learning how to groom and put saddles on the horses. Soon, they'll start riding. That's when the greatest benefits will unfold.

Buccino said first and foremost, the athletes will learn leadership and build self-confidence.

"They are in charge of this horse. It's a real confidence builder when you turn around and see that you're leading this thousand-pound animal and it's doing what you ask it to do," she said. "Once they get on the horse, it's empowering."

She said riding a horse uses nearly all of a rider's muscles. So if an athlete struggles with balance, riding will develop their

core strength and help them become more balanced. But overall, the program will improve the athletes' mental health and independence.

"When you see the smiles on these kids' faces as they're getting on the horses, they're so proud of themselves," Buccino said.

On Tuesday morning, Schofield finalized Special Olympics South Carolina's partnership with Wild Hearts by presenting a check for \$3,000 to the center. The funds will sponsor one horse for the program.

"This is the very beginning of our first equestrian program for Area 14 — it's a new venture," she said. "And we couldn't have asked for a better farm to partner with."

Seneca Mayor Dan Alexander attended the celebration on Tuesday. He said Wild Hearts has collaborated with South Carolina Vocational Rehabilitation, and he appreciates the partnership.

"Wild Hearts is doing amazing things in this community," Alexander said. "The name is Wild Hearts, but there's lots of happy hearts out here today. There's lots of love on this farm."

Buccino and Fry said they'd love to see the program grow. Folks can sponsor horses or simply donate to the cause.

"The more horses we have, the more volunteers we have, the more athletes we can serve," Buccino said.

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