

Operation Saddle Up signs up for rodeo

Opening ceremonies of a rodeo show are traditionally patriotic, dramatic and emotional. One of Ramona Rodeo's evening grand entries will have an added dash of patriotism as injured servicemen ride into the arena representing Cornerstone Therapeutic Riding Center's Operation Saddle Up.

"We're watching the horses transform lives," said Judy Beckett, founder and director of the Cornerstone therapeutic center, located on eight acres of Creek Hollow Ranch in Ramona. "It's truly miraculous, the effect the horses have on them...It's profound, humbling, probably the most life-changing experience I've had. Watching what's happening is a blessing."

Operation Saddle Up, a Cornerstone project, helps injured veterans "get their lives back in the saddle."

"Changing lives, building dreams, opening doors" is what the therapeutic riding center is about. It works with the handicapped from children through adults.

In January 2008, Cornerstone was one of three programs invited to participate in a pilot program created by the J.F. Shea Center in San Juan Capistrano to assist wounded and ill veterans. Beckett, a North American Riding for the Handicapped instructor,

responded with an enthusiastic yes.

Soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with lost limbs, post traumatic stress disorder and other war-related illnesses and injuries come to Operation Saddle Up, and Beckett sees the effect the horses have on them. One man was nonverbal and could barely follow directions. Another was shaking like a leaf when he arrived and "by the end of the lesson, he was laughing and was having the time of his life," said Beckett.

A technician with the wounded veteran told Beckett that, if he hadn't seen it, he wouldn't have believed it. He told her the soldier talked more during his first day at Operation Saddle Up than he had the two previous months.

"That's what the horses are doing," said Beckett.

One man, diagnosed as a non-smiler, "was laughing and giggling," said Beckett, "and that's what the horses did."

One or two of the injured veterans will ride into the rodeo arena on horseback, and Beckett will have a Cornerstone booth at the Ramona Outdoor Community Center throughout rodeo weekend. Visitors to the booth will have an opportunity to learn about Cornerstone, the Operation Saddle Up program, and 2nd Annual Chili Cook Off scheduled to



benefit the center. Don't be surprised if Beckett tries to sign you up as an Operation Saddle Up volunteer. If more people volunteer, she will be able to add a second day a week to group rides.

The Chili Cook Off will be at Creek Hollow Ranch at 25201 Creek Hollow Drive from 5 to 10 p.m. on June 5.

Earlier in the day will be a Poker Ride that will start at noon at the staging area off Aqua Lane.

Poker Ride registration will be at 11 a.m. on June 5.

Chili Cook Off tickets are \$10 and may be purchased at the Cornerstone booth at the rodeo. For more information, visit the booth, call 760-789-4875 or visit www.cornerstontrc.org.

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