

THE AMERICAN VETERAN

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SEGMENT TITLE: TROT THERAPY

JENNIFER BRADEN, HOST: VA IS CONSTANTLY EXPLORING NEW WAYS TO CARE FOR PATIENTS RETURNING FROM THE MIDDLE EAST WITH TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURY. SCOTT WALLACE REPORTS FROM TUCSON, ARIZONA, WHERE COMMUNITY VOLUNTEERS ARE TEAMING WITH VA IN A SPECIAL PROGRAM TO GET THESE VETERANS BACK IN THE SADDLE.

SCOTT WALLACE, REPORTER: IT'S FRIDAY MORNING AT THIS UNUSUAL HORSE RANCH IN SOUTHERN ARIZONA. IT'S CALLED "THERAPEUTIC RIDING OF TUCSON" OR "TROT", A NONPROFIT CENTER STAFFED BY VOLUNTEERS. FOR VETERANS CLAUDIA CARREON AND ERIK CASTILLO, THIS IS A TIME TO BE CHERISHED.

WALLACE: BOTH ARE VICTIMS OF TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURY, OR TBI, SUFFERED IN IRAQ. AND THIS IS BECOMING A KEY INGREDIENT IN THEIR RECOVERY. IT'S CALLED EQUINE THERAPY. OTHERWISE KNOWN AS HORSEBACK RIDING TO SOOTH THE SOUL.

VARDI, THERAPEUTIC RIDING INSTRUCTOR: THE HORSE IS A VERY SENSITIVE, EMPATHETIC ANIMAL. AND SO THEY ACTUALLY WILL BOND TO THEIR RIDERS AND ACCOMMODATE THEMSELVES TO THEIR RIDERS.

CLAUDIA CARREON, SPECIALIST, US ARMY RESERVE: I FEEL HAPPY. I FEEL RELAXED. I DISCOVER EVERYDAY DIFFERENT NOISES, THE BIRDS, THE FEATURES, NEW PEOPLE.

ERIK CASTILLO, OIF VETERAN: I'M KIND OF PROUD OF MYSELF. AND IF YOU WOULD HAVE KNOWN ME WHEN I WAS INJURED, OR EVEN A YEAR AFTER I WAS INJURED, YOU'D JUST SAY "YOU'RE A MIRACLE" OR SOMETHING, BECAUSE I WAS UP THERE ON THAT HORSE.

WALLACE: THAT RENEWED SENSE OF PRIDE IS A BIG PART OF WHAT PROGRAM DIRECTOR MARY VARDI IS TRYING TO ACHIEVE.

VARDI: I FEEL IT GIVES THEM DAILY SKILLS, NOT ONLY IN THE AREA OF EQUESTRIAN SPORTS, BUT IT ALSO GIVES THEM THE CONFIDENCE TO GO OUT IN THE WORLD AND TRY NEW THINGS AND DO NEW THINGS.

WALLACE: IT TOOK 12 HOURS OF SURGERY JUST TO RECONSTRUCT THE RIGHT SIDE OF ERIK CASTILLO'S FACE AFTER HE SUFFERED A MASSIVE HEAD WOUND THREE YEARS AGO IN IRAQ. HIS RECOVERY HAS BEEN MIRACULOUS. ERIK'S REHAB NOW INCLUDES DAILY VISITS TO THE TUCSON VA MEDICAL CENTER.

WALLACE: ERIK'S LEFT SIDE IS STILL PARTIALLY PARALYZED AND HIS SENSE OF BALANCE REMAINS WEAK. AND THAT'S ALSO WHY HORSEBACK RIDING CAN REALLY HELP PATIENTS LIKE ERIK.

VARDI: THE MOVEMENT OF THE HORSE ACTUALLY MIMICS THE MOVEMENT OF THE PERSON AT A WALK, SO THAT WHEN SOMEONE WHO HAS A LACK OF BALANCE, LACK OF COORDINATION, THE MOVEMENT OF THE HORSE CAN ACTUALLY HELP BUILD THAT COORDINATION AND BALANCE.

CASTILLO: WHEN THE HORSE IS WALKING, MY HIP IS FEELING THE PRESSURE, IS SIGNALING TO MY BRAIN, YOU KNOW, "THIS IS HOW YOU WALK: LEFT, RIGHT, LEFT, RIGHT."

WALLACE: AND IT JUST FEELS GOOD TOO.

CARREON: WHEN I TAKE A DEEP BREATH, LIKE TO RELAX, THE HORSE DOES SO TOO. SO, IT'S A VERY BEAUTIFUL EXPERIENCE FOR ME.

WALLACE: ARMY RESERVIST CLAUDIA CARREON WAS IN A HEAD-ON COLLISION FOUR YEARS AGO IN IRAQ THAT WIPED OUT HER ABILITY TO REMEMBER. SO WITH HER, VARDI TAKES A DIFFERENT APPROACH.

VARDI: WE WILL CREATE A PROGRAM THAT ACTUALLY WILL HELP SHARPEN THE MEMORY. WE TELL HER IN THE BEGINNING, "YOU NEED TO ZIGZAG THROUGH THE CONES," "YOU NEED TO WALK BETWEEN THE POLES," "YOU NEED TO STOP IN THE BOX."

WALLACE: THOUGH CLAUDIA NEEDS TO KEEP A WRITTEN LOG TO RECALL JUST ABOUT EVERYTHING, THE SESSIONS SLOWLY ARE REKINDLING HER ABILITY TO REMEMBER.

CARREON: IF I DON'T REMEMBER HOW TO HOLD THE REINS, THEN SHE JUST GIVES ME A CLUE -- SHE DOESN'T TELL ME HOW -- AND THEN THAT KIND OF MAKES ME REMEMBER.

WALLACE: AND ALL THE WHILE THE HORSES ARE GIVING THE PATIENTS A LOT MORE THAN JUST A RIDE.

CARREON: I FEEL WE ARE GETTING COMMUNICATION, THE HORSE AND I. WHEN I SPEAK, "WALK ON," OR "TROT," I SEE THAT HE IS LISTENING TO ME BECAUSE HIS EARS TURN TO ME.

CASTILLO: IT'S KIND OF AMAZING BECAUSE I NEVER EVEN THOUGHT I WOULD BE STANDING NEAR A HORSE, LET ALONE RIDING A HORSE.

VARDI: BEING WITH A HORSE, BEING CLOSE TO THAT BIG, LARGE, WONDERFUL ANIMAL IS SOMETHING THAT ABSOLUTELY CONTRIBUTES TO EVERY RIDER'S LIFE, EVERY PERSON'S LIFE THAT IS TOUCHED BY THEIR EQUINE FRIENDS.

BRADEN: MARY VARDI GOT HER TRAINING AND TEN YEARS OF EXPERIENCE IN HORSE THERAPY IN ISRAEL HELPING ISRAELI SOLDIERS RECOVER FROM INJURIES.

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