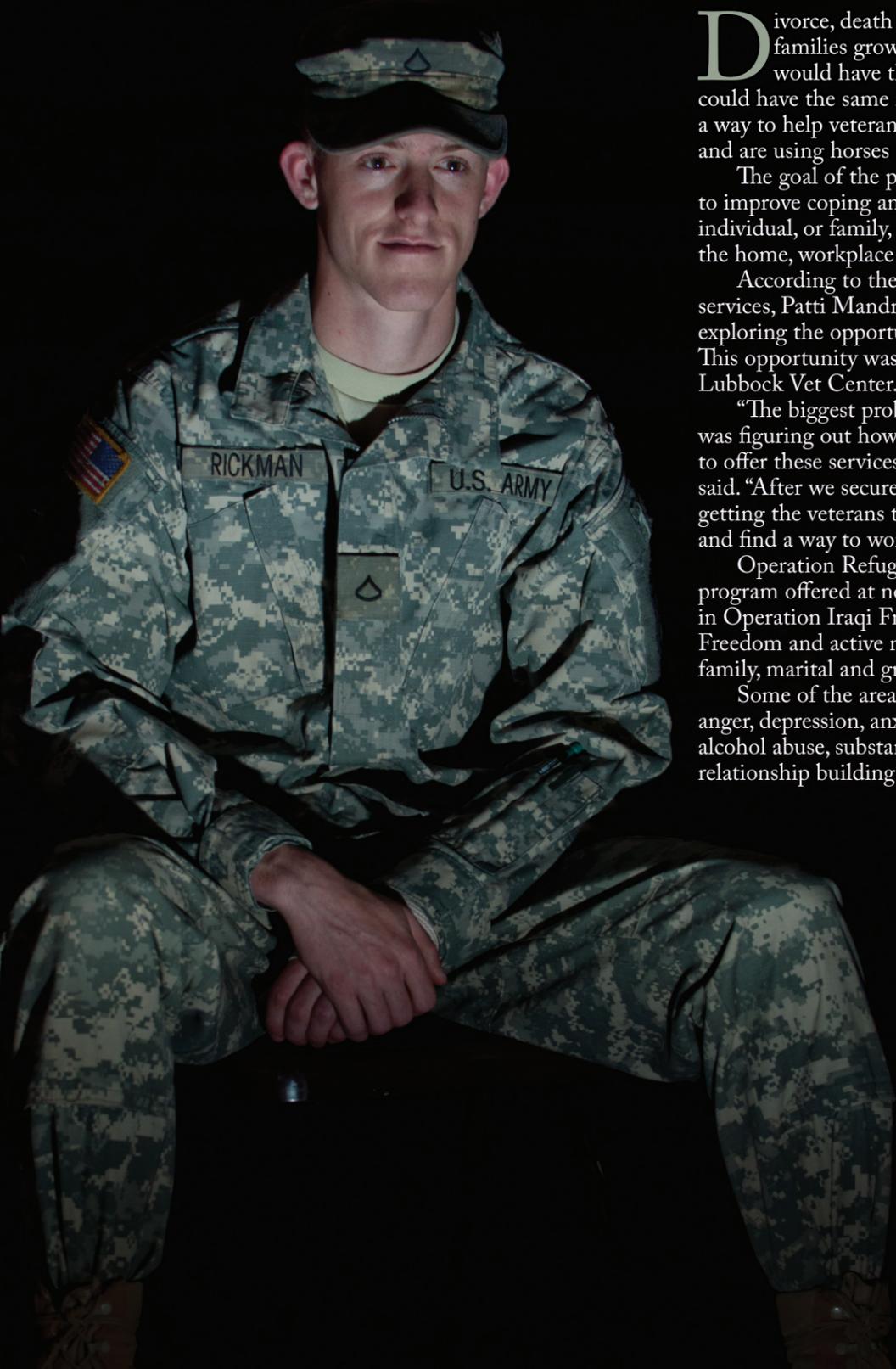


From Darkness to Light



Divorce, death and separation all can lead to families growing apart from each other but who would have thought that a returning soldier could have the same impact. Refuge Services have found a way to help veterans adjust to living a civilian life again, and are using horses to achieve their goals.

The goal of the program, Operation Refuge, is to improve coping and functioning and restore the individual, or family, to a meaningful productive status in the home, workplace and community.

According to the co-founder and director of therapy services, Patti Mandrell, Refuge Services first started exploring the opportunity to help veterans in May 2007. This opportunity was presented to them through the Lubbock Vet Center.

“The biggest problem in getting the program started was figuring out how to fund the services; the goal was to offer these services to veterans at no charge,” Mandrell said. “After we secure funding, we have to work on getting the veterans to admit that they have a problem and find a way to work through them.”

Operation Refuge is a unique horse therapy wellness program offered at no charge for veterans that served in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom and active military. They offer individual, family, marital and group formats available.

Some of the areas that the therapy focuses on are anger, depression, anxiety, readjustment, combat stress, alcohol abuse, substance abuse, physical injuries and relationship building.



“This type of therapy is not a one time thing,” Mandrell said. “We schedule them to come every week.”

According to the Lubbock Vet Center, it is not the typical sit-down, share feelings therapy and has seen it be successful with patients that the traditional therapy did not work for.

“We have one couple that were dealing with anger problems after he returned from the war,” said Leah Mailman, an intern at the Lubbock Vet Center. “Since they have participated in Operation Refuge, they now are able to better manage their problems and make things work.”

In 2009, the spark to help veterans was relit when Mike Henderson decided that he wanted to volunteer at Refuge Services. Henderson, an alumnus of Texas Tech University, was a veteran himself, and spoke more with Mandrell about starting a program for veterans.

“I am a war veteran who is still struggling with pathologies associated with post traumatic stress disorder,” Henderson said. “Consequently, some social work fields were not very good matches for me.”

In Henderson’s senior year of college he had to select an agency at which to complete an internship. Running out of ideas, he said he decided he needed some “God help” and through a series of unexpected circumstances, was introduced to an opportunity at Refuge helping write grant proposals.

In addition to helping write a grant, Henderson also spent time lobbying and visiting with people from other programs to see how funding and other sessions worked.

“It is a tiny thing that we can do to say thank you. They give up so much for us and we just want to be able to do something for them.”

“It was great having Mike help us, he knew the right people and was able to get us connected with them,” Mandrell said, as she leaned forward in her chair and voice got louder. “Mike helped bring a passion out in me for helping veterans.”

Refuge ended up not receiving the grants that they had applied for so decided to put faith in the community and started fundraising for the veteran’s program.

In July 2010, Refuge Services hosted the first annual Boots & Buckles Benefit in an effort to build the scholarship funds for this program to begin. The mission was a success raising more than \$35,000.

“I was blown away with how willing our community has been to help us,” Mandrell said. “Because of the fundraiser we were able to start our first group last fall.”

At this time, Operation Refuge began to provide services to veterans and their families struggling to cope with the collateral social, emotional and psychological impacts of the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Lubbock Vet Center has a support group for veterans returning from war and Refuge is now part of that support group.

“It is a tiny thing that we can do to say thank you. They give up so much for us and we just want to be able to do something for them,” Mandrell said. “We have been helping children for 12 years, we have that going and now this gives an opportunity to help more people.”

Many of the people Refuge has seen in previous veterans groups have already signed up for their next round of therapy.

The goal of Operation Refuge in 2012 is to provide veterans and their families with 800 hours of therapy.

“One client told me that there are things that he can work through out here that he would never think about sharing if these sessions were conducted in an office,” Mandrell said. “Everything out here is hands-on and that is one of the reasons they can accomplish so much out here.”

Mandrell described this process as a hands-on solution to the problems veterans are struggling with on a daily basis. **T**

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