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Rehabilitating those who served: veterans nonprofit also takes care of families



Photo courtesy Heartbeat Serving Wounded Warriors

In an undated photo, two veterans participate in the Snohomish-based Heartbeat Serving Wounded Warriors' scuba program at the pool at Tumwater's Valley Athletic Club, which is conveniently located close to Joint Base Lewis-McChord. The organization also has equine therapy and K9 therapy.

SNOHOMISH — The nonprofit Heartbeat Serving Wounded Warriors helps veterans largely fresh from tours of duty, where the needs can be high.

It was not started as a branch of the well-known Wounded Warrior Project organization, but was borne from the mind of a Snohomish woman and her unflinching commitment to veterans and an idea.

Janice Buckley, the president and founder of Heartbeat, said the idea of offering more alternative therapy programs through her organization has made all the difference to not only the warriors, but also to their families.

“It’s totally by God’s grace that we got this going and keep it going with donations,” said Buckley. “We need to serve them, because they served our country.”

Heartbeat was started by Buckley and a few volunteers in 2010 and it has grown in therapy programs offered, but the administrative side remains the same so as to afford to offer the programs for free since the nonprofit functions from donations.

Seven years ago, Heartbeat offered just two programs for wounded veterans. The organization has grown to more programs each year since.

The therapy programs include SCUBA Warriors, Back in the Saddle Warriors (BITS) equine assisted therapy, K9 Healing Warriors and the brand-new BITS Kids for the children of veterans. The emergency assistance programs include giving food gift cards, utility payments, rent assistance, ARC kits (Assignment Recovery and Comfort) that are for incoming wounded, warrior family adoptions and sponsorships for Christmas, and the Christmas stocking program for families.

“It came out of just a passion for our military,” Buckley said. “I think every civilian needs to step up, in any way, to honor these incredible heroes that put their lives on the line for us every day.” Buckley, a single mother of two, hasn’t served in the United States military, but said her passion for the veterans is what made her commit to getting things going several years ago. “Coming back to the civilian world for the warriors is hard for them,” Buckley said. “But coming back wounded, is a whole other thing.”

Sometimes those wounds can be in the form of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or traumatic brain injury, spinal cord injury, speech and communication impairment, loss of limbs, and other physical ailments from serving. Many of the wounded veterans served by Heartbeat are War on Terror vets, and a few served in Vietnam and Desert Storm.

The therapy offered, for free, can make all the difference in recovery, according to Buckley, who follows each case closely and facilitates the sessions with the instructors and volunteers.

There’s a horse ranch in Tumwater where the BITS Warrior equine therapy sessions are held, and the SCUBA Warrior in south Puget Sound. The K9 Healing Warriors is a case-by-case basis and can sometimes include the veteran’s own dog if they meet the trainer qualifications and pass the certification; otherwise Heartbeat tries to find a good K9 candidate for the veteran based on his or her needs and injury.

Buckley has many stories of her warriors persevering and thriving in the therapy programs. “A lot of these guys and gals hit with traumatic brain injury have severe migraines,” she said. “We had one special forces soldier who came into our SCUBA Warrior program, and he had been shot in the head, so he suffered migraines. He told us that at certain levels while underwater, his migraines went away. Migraines, nightmares, they interrupt sleep... you need sleep to heal, your brain needs that, and they can’t sleep if they’re ‘on patrol’ all the time, or if they have nightmares. Scuba helps their minds clear, they’ve told me.”

With the BITS Warrior equine therapy, handling horses helps them re-align their pelvic bone (if they have an injury there and depending on the severity) as well as learn patience in handling the large animals.

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“This isn’t just ‘giddy up and ride’ kind of therapy, the warriors need to help take care of the horses, and earn their trust,” Buckley said. “I’ve got horses of my own, and what horses teach us, as big as they are, if they feel there’s something that is coming that could bring them harm or if they pick up any anxiety, anger, or in a hurry, they are gone. What that does for our warriors is without having a counselor tell them to slow down, to calm their mind, the horses do that in how they handle.”

The two programs were the original therapy programs offered by Heartbeat and have consistent success, according to Buckley. The K9 program is also thriving, with Heartbeat assisting in matching dogs with warriors for their needs and training capabilities, as well as covering the initial veterinarian and training bills. Dog therapy helps some warriors with anxiety nightmares and some physical issues. The dogs are also known to help heal families, which to some, is the most important thing about the organization.

The effects the therapies have on the soldiers also touch their family members. “When the parent serves, the whole family serves,” Buckley said. “The spouses, especially. They are the ‘quiet warriors’ and they suffer from the injuries to their spouse who served as well. They, too, have to adjust to a new life and taking care or helping the warrior heal.” Buckley described how some soldiers, who had struggled with PTSD or other injuries that had caused a rift with their spouse and children, have been able to go back and mend the relationship issues. “So, they heal in many ways,” she said.

One way the organization shows the warrior families love is through the spirit of Christmas. Each year in December, the nonprofit gets different business or organizations to “adopt” or sponsor a warrior’s family for holiday meals and gifts. They also gather gift and basic items for Christmas stockings, about 600 of them made by volunteers or donated by community members. Heartbeat organizes a mass “stocking stuffer party” to get all the stockings stuffed with gift cards and toiletries in time for a delivery to each warrior family. “We have a ‘head elf,’ Helen, who organizes that every year,” Buckley said. Donations for the stockings can be made online or dropped off in Snohomish after contacting Buckley. Volunteers are also needed for the Dec. 9 stocking packing party.

“We are a community organization in the sense that we aid warriors to re-adjust to civilian life so they can participate in their communities again,” Buckley said. “We can’t do this alone, so we do need more volunteers, grants and donations. It’s not just about me, or you, or any particular person. It’s about serving our warriors, because they’ve served us, our country. Heartbeat doesn’t take a penny from the warrior for our programs, and I’ve always felt that everybody needs to be part of something that serves. This has changed my life in helping the soldiers, and I know it has helped change their lives. Who wouldn’t want that?”

More information can be found at www.hearbeatforwarriors.org with donation information, additional therapy program information and how wounded veterans can sign up for the program.