

## At this special ranch, veterans find hope, healing after wounds of war



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To most people, the animals in veteran Tice Ridley's menagerie look like they're living a comfortable life of leisure. But the five goats, two alpacas, two rabbits, potbellied pig, cat, guinea pig, dog and five horses (including two miniature horses) play critical roles in helping [veterans](#), along with first responders and their families, heal from the wounds of war.

Ridley, 44, a retired major and decorated Army war veteran who served for 18 years, calls this endeavor [the Circle of Veterans and Families](#), and its mission is "to keep soldiers alive and families together."



*Richard K. Riley*

Decorated veteran Tice Ridley, right, met with Florida Rep. Gus Bilirakis, vice chairman of the Congressional Veterans Affairs Committee, at the Circle of Veterans Ranch to explain the program.

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And while [Veterans Day](#) has passed, Ridley is committed to his cause 365 days a year.

### ‘Not all wounds are visible’

In 2015, after taking medical retirement from the Army the previous year, he co-founded the nonprofit organization with his wife, Samantha Ridley, in the Dade City/Lacoochee area of Florida. Located on his 10-acre Circle V Ranch, the project gives him purpose

while providing peers hope — for the Ridleys are keenly aware that “not all wounds are visible,” he told TODAY.

The ranch welcomed its first veteran guests Nov. 2 in a joint effort with James A. Haley Veterans Hospital in Tampa, Florida, to provide services to veterans. The comprehensive curriculum includes transitional on-site housing in a 4,200-square-foot home, along with other supportive services such as therapy and counseling, food, transportation and individual case management.

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*Richard K. Riley*

A visiting veteran cozies up to Betsy, a friendly resident chicken, at the Circle V Ranch.

The use of proven alternative therapies differentiates the ranch from more traditional treatment facilities. At Circle V, participants can engage in meditation, yoga, hypnosis and smoking cessation. They can also participate in peer group support, equine-assisted psychotherapy and companion dog pairing — canine therapy with man's best friend.

## Ending the circle of addiction



Jay Hoffman, who served in the Navy from 1972 to 1975, visited the ranch on that first day. He's rehabilitating from drug and alcohol addiction and believes that this time will truly be different.



*Richard K Riley*

Veteran and first residential client Jay Hoffman appreciates the warmth of an equine nose

“Tice has opened up a door for me,” Hoffman told TODAY. He noted that addiction treatment at a for-profit facility usually means when the treatment period ends, he’s sent “back to the streets, with no place to go. If you want to get drunk or high then, you can.”

But being at the ranch is like “being in no man’s land, and that’s good,” he said. “We’re so far out here, away from the city. Friends and the animals are just so therapeutic.” Hoffman said he likes rubbing the ears of the rescue potbellied pig, Bacon, and feeding him. He also pets the resident kitty, Mittens, and waters the horses.

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*Richard K. Riley*

Bacon, the potbellied pig and farm mascot, "smiles" for the camera.

## Filling a critical void

For a year or so, Ridley and his wife had been self-funding limited weekend visits on the ranch as a test run for the broader program that was just implemented. They drew rave reviews from participating local veterans, but Ridley knew that the need in his area and across the nation was so much greater, and he wanted to do more.





*Richard K. Riley*

Donna Neff of ADL Service Dogs introduces Raven, a companion dog in training, to Ridley before a petting session with Circle residents.

He could speak from personal experience, too. Ridley, who has six medals for outstanding service, returned from Afghanistan in 2010; in 2013 he was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. And he's far from alone: The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs [estimates that 8 million adults have PTSD](#) during a given year.

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Like so many of his peers, Ridley found himself struggling to understand his condition, he told TODAY. He also struggled to find help so he could integrate better into society and try to live a normal life. He knew it wasn't going to be easy to curb his symptomatic meltdowns, panic attacks and anger. At the time, Ridley lived in

Chicago, which has no military base, meaning a dearth of treatment resources for veterans.

## More than medication

Ridley knew that waiting to obtain mental health treatment could be unbearably long, and that recommendations were typically limited to medications that turned him into a "zombie," he said. He wanted to investigate lesser-known alternative therapies he'd heard about, some of which involved his passion for animals.



*Richard K. Riley*

Time for food, friends and fellowship at the Circle of Veterans and Families

He was especially motivated after a disappointing visit, accompanied by his wife, that he'd had with a therapist in Chicago. That counselor, who was unfamiliar with the nuances of PTSD, gently advised



Samantha to "just leave" or divorce her husband when it appeared that Ridley's current treatment regimen wasn't working.

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But the couple wouldn't even consider that advice. Instead, Ridley decided to try alternatives including hypnosis and rapid-resolution therapy, which helps eliminate negative effects of past experiences without having the patient re-experience the traumatic event. The treatments helped, and Ridley says he's a lot less jumpy now and less prone to outbursts or periods of extreme emotional upset.

Now, he's committed to spreading that love.



"For a couple to open their home to other veterans just blows me away," said one veteran.

"What's happening at Circle V is such important work for people who have experienced the tragedies of war," said Darlene Williams, a licensed clinical psychologist and certified hypnotherapist who sees veteran clients at the ranch.

"The problems can be very complex and for that we need to offer something more comprehensive," she told TODAY. "The research supports the benefits of these kinds of alternative therapies for military populations."



*Richard K. Riley*

Sam the alpaca is another rescue who has become a therapy animal and a fan favorite.

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Williams is also certified to perform equine-assisted psychotherapy and has witnessed firsthand the healing power of animals. Now she's part of a team of alternative providers that finds Circle V's serene environment an ideal place to welcome veterans for treatments customized to each individual, she said.

"I expect them to start releasing anger, reconnect and get grounded while working through the exercises," Williams said.





*Tice Ridley*

Jay Hoffman introduces another new resident to the therapy horse team.

## Giving back to fellow veterans

Local Army veteran Gil D'Amore, whose leg was amputated in 1987, said being on the ranch has helped him put his life back together. "You give somebody a thimbleful of hope, and now they have something to live for," he told TODAY. "We veterans are expected to solve our problems with medications, but those can create two or three other problems. Being here has helped me see the long-term effects and ramifications of change without negativity — if I just look deep enough inside myself."



The animals allow veterans to “detach” from everyday worries, he said. “We can focus all our energy on the dogs, for example, that have unconditional love for us.”



*Tice Ridley*

Tice Ridley and Bacon, the resident pig, share a moment.

Some people may be intimidated by the horses' size, Ridley admits, but clients don't ride them. Instead, they do what's called "ground work," and it's therapeutic for veterans.

"With ground work, they can't touch the horses or use a treat," he said. "They can put a halter on them and they can try to figure out what the horse wants in other intuitive ways."



*Richard K. Riley*

Circle of Veterans residents and employees enjoy a sunset at the ranch fire pit.

Ridley's other furry creatures provide a warm, hands-on experience to calm sensitive nerves and allow the veterans to know the joy of safe, noncompetitive "aha! moments" when they interact with animals.

"For a couple to open their home to other veterans just blows me away," said a friend and veteran who wishes to remain anonymous. "They are so gracious and kind."

As for Ridley, he's proud of his fellow veterans. On Nov. 18, he hosted a special Thanksgiving dinner for them and the ranch's supporters. He's looking forward to many more, since he knows Veterans Day is but one day a year.

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