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Retreat focuses on women veterans

Sanctuary One pilot program has room for 16 vets in need of emotional healing

January 30, 2009

 By **Paul Fattig**
 Mail Tribune
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RUCH — A \$5,000 grant recently awarded to the nonprofit Sanctuary One at Double Oak Farm in the upper Applegate Valley will be used to offer retreats for veterans and their families.

The Cow Creek Umpqua Indian Foundation grant will serve as seed money for the facility's first veterans' project, a three-day retreat for women veterans beginning April 10, said sanctuary director Stacy Bannerman.

"That funding commitment will launch the pilot program for us," she said. "We expect to have room for 16 women veterans from Southern Oregon for our first project. There is a real need for a program like this here."

Studies by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs have shown that women veterans and veterans in rural areas are in need of programs to help them cope with civilian life, she said.

"This is one of the first of its kind in the country to focus on women veterans," she said. "We are hoping to reach this gap in services in our area."

All women veterans are eligible, particularly those who have served in Iraq or Afghanistan. Active duty personnel as well as National Guard members and reservists also are encouraged to attend.

Deadline for applying is March 15. Located south of Ruch off Upper Applegate Road downstream from the Applegate Dam, it was originally founded last year as an animal sanctuary but early plans called for retreats for veterans and others in need of healing.

During the sanctuary on the 55-acre farm, the women veterans will be able to share their experiences with other female veterans and learn to better understand how post-traumatic stress disorder can affect them. They will also learn tools of dealing with that delayed stress, including yoga, massage therapy, keeping journals and other activity.

Participants can also learn how to fill out VA claim forms from a female veteran.

"What this program is about is providing a service to an underserved population of veterans," she said. "Our veterans will be living with war for the rest of their lives. We need to make sure we are there to support them."

In addition to Bannerman, whose husband, Lorin, is currently on his second deployment in Iraq, serving with the Washington Army National Guard, other hosts will include Sara Rich, a trauma informed counselor and the mother of a woman Iraq combat veteran, and Army veteran Susan Avila-Smith, founder of Women Organizing Women: Veteran Advocacy for Women Who Served in the Military.

"We felt it was critical the providers putting on the program were veterans or family members of veterans," Bannerman stressed. "These populations of veterans have their own unique personal challenges."

For instance, she observed that female veterans are more apt to get a divorce than their male counterparts, she said.

Cost for participating is \$500 per individual but fundraising is under way to make the retreat available at no cost to participants. Scholarships are available for Oregon residents, including travel reimbursement.

Another sanctuary is expected to be held this fall for the wives of combat veterans.

"We know there is a need — we're doing what we can," Bannerman said.

For additional information on the retreat for women veterans, contact Bannerman at 646-0220 or check out www.sanctuaryone.org.

Reach reporter Paul Fattig at 776-4496 or e-mail him at pfattig@mailtribune.com.

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