

Veterans and Families Find New Pals at Annual Vet Fest

by Lily Miller

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The color guard stands at attention during the singing of the national anthem, kicking off Vet Fest at Pal-O-Mine Equestrian. Photo credit: Lily Miller.

Rain may have pushed the horseshoe painting, games and other activities inside the barn at Pal-O-Mine Equestrian on Sunday, October 11, but it did not stop families from gathering or veterans from finding connections.

That search for connection was at the heart of Vet Fest, a free event for veterans, active service members and their friends and families. Held at Pal-O-Mine's 13-acres in Islandia, the event combined a resource fair with a day of activities, coffee and doughnuts in the morning and lunch later on.

“Community and connection” are what Rachel Gearwar, Pal-O-Mine’s military liaison, hopes attendees took away from the day.

The Long Island Veteran Suicide Prevention Coalition sponsored the event, which brought together more than 20 organizations offering information on housing, health care, employment, mental health and additional support, education, and financial and legal assistance. Among the organizations tabling were the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Services for the Underserved, YES Community Counseling Center, New York State Defenders Association, Northwell Health, CN Guidance and Counseling Services, United Veterans Beacon House, Team Rubicon and LICADD.

Dora Lupo, Pal-O-Mine’s clinical coordinator, described Vet Fest as a family event more than anything else, hoping that veterans can take a moment to slow down and share a day with their loved ones.

“It’s really for a community, a family connection,” Lupo said. “We’re all trying to just...help each other.”

Several of the organizations at the event echoed that same sentiment. Elyse Sheehan, staff attorney in the Veterans Defense Program of the New York State Defenders Association, said the program uses what it calls “holistic lawyering” to support veterans involved in the criminal justice system. Along with legal help, its veteran case managers connect clients with employment, education and other community services.

“Short answer, we help with legal. Long answer, we’ll help them with anything they have,” Sheehan said. Financial barriers, she added, can make it difficult for veterans to get legal help. The program hopes to build a Long Island network of attorneys willing to assist veterans at reduced rates or pro bono.

Julianna Ardolina, of YES Community Counseling Center, described the organization’s approach as focused on accessibility and community-based support. Its Bridges program serves people under 25 with short-term mental

health services in familiar settings. “It’s all about access and meeting them where they’re at,” she said. Those services are not exclusively for veterans.

At the CN Guidance and Counseling Services table, U.S. Navy veteran Tabitha Robbins spoke about her work as a peer support specialist and her role in developing the agency’s peer support program.

“What peer support entails is like a shared experience,” Robbins said. “In my case, it’s veterans.”

For Luis Bocanegra, a Navy veteran who served for 22 years and now works with Services for the Underserved, that kind of assistance matters during the transition to civilian life. He described veterans returning without the support or resources they need to navigate everyday costs and responsibilities. Having experienced homelessness after his service, he said, motivates him to help veterans facing similar struggles.

The schedule for the day included roping, a color guard and the national anthem, along with games, horseshoe painting and livestock education. But Vet Fest also offered a chance to learn about Pal-O-Mine’s own programs. The entire location and programming are completely accessible, except to service dogs, including the horses themselves. The horses take part in a trial period, typically three months, to see how they respond to the many activities and sensory experiences at the farm, Gearwar said. Some are trained to work with students with disabilities, including with the use of a specialized lift to help wheelchair users mount a horse.

One of those horses is Goliath, a Belgian draft horse who once competed in concrete-pulling events. He now works as a riding horse and participates in other Pal-O-Mine programs, including equine-assisted psychotherapy.

Pal-O-Mine also received a \$500 donation from AMVETS Ronkonkoma Post 48. Fred Pearl, a member of Post 48, said donations raised by the post are kept in a separate account for contributions to veteran organizations and

assistance to veterans. Ed Teller, also a member, said the post viewed Pal-O-Mine as a worthwhile organization to support.

Lisa Gatti, Pal-O-Mine's founder and CEO, said supporting groups like Post 48 matters to the organization and that hosting events like Vet Fest is "our honor in order to thank them for their service."

For Lupo, families spending time together, people talking and attendees leaving with a sense that they are not alone is a sign of a successful festival. "People smiling," she said, is one sign that the event has brought people together.

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