RANCHIN' VETS
Serving those who have served us
by Freelance Author Karen Pavone for Ranchin' Vets

Transitioning into civilian life after active military duty is a challenging and critical time for many returning American soldiers. After facing the adrenaline-charged atmosphere of combat, many veterans are forever changed. They often find themselves at odds when they come home, and desperately need a safe place to find peace as well as meaningful work.

Meet Kevin and Corey Downs. Their fledgling non-profit mentorship program, Ranchin’ Vets, partners with ranchers nationwide to facilitate job opportunities in agriculture for post-9/11 servicemen and women who are reentering civilian life following active duty in the United States Armed Forces.

Now in its third year, the organization was founded on the ideal that livestock management is one of America’s oldest traditions and requires uncompromising work ethic, spirit, and sacrifice. The Downs believe that America’s veterans are tailor-made for that calling. “Nobody better understands sacrifice than our brave veterans,” says Kevin, “yet they have one of the highest unemployment rates in our country. We wanted to do something to be part of the solution. They answered the call to serve us. Ranchin’ Vets is here to serve them.”

Ranchin’ Vets facilitates introductions between veterans and ranchers interested in mentoring them as working ranch hands. In addition, the non-profit provides each vet with a stipend to aid in defraying the cost of housing, clothing and transportation.

Connecting ranchers and veterans has proven to be a good fit for both. Kevin’s wife, Corey, notes that the average age of a rancher in California is 55, and many are faced with successor generations that aren’t interested in continuing the family business. “Veterans can provide a sustainable work force to fill that need,” she says. “They are task-oriented learners who pick things up quickly and enjoy working with their hands.”

Inspired by Kevin’s brother, Capt. Phil Downs, Jr., a Marine with three tours of duty in Iraq to his credit, the couple started the non-profit as a way of helping post 9/11 veterans find work in a therapeutic outdoor environment. Their mission is based on the belief that veterans, who often suffer from post traumatic stress issues, find peace working with animals in a quiet, rural farm setting.

Ranchin’ Vets hopes its partnerships will result in longterm jobs for its veterans, but they recognize that many ranchers may only have openings for seasonal hires. “We have placed qualified vets in temporary positions,” says Corey, “and we encourage interested ranchers to sign up on our website even if they don’t have a current opening, but may have one in the future.”

Kevin originally came up with the concept for Ranchin’ Vets while attending college and working as a summer hire ranch hand at Stemple Creek Ranch near Tomales in West Marin County. He recalls, “At the end
of each day, when the sun was going down and the fog was rolling in, I would drive my four-wheeler to the top of the hill, turn off the engine, and just listen. All I could hear was the sound of the cows ripping the grass from the earth. It was incredibly peaceful. I wanted to share that experience with our veterans."

Fourth generation Stemple Creek Ranch owner Loren Pocenia and his wife Lisa have been advocates of the program from the start, and sit on the non-profit's board of directors.

"We love being involved with Ranchin' Vets because it is win-win," says Pocenia. "We get a great, hard-working employee to help us on the ranch, and the veteran gets a great job opportunity. We are honored to help military veterans in any way we can, and this is a perfect way to do it."

Cpl. Brett Billingsley is a Ranchin' Vet placement currently working part-time at Stemple Creek Ranch while completing his studies in Fire Science at nearby Santa Rosa Junior College. A former Marine who was deployed to Afghanistan, Billingsley saw an ad posted by the non-profit in the college Veterans Affairs office. The experience has been transformational for him.

"Ranchin' Vets has been an amazing opportunity through and through," he says. "Corey and Kevin are very supportive and truly enjoy helping vets like myself transition back into the civilian world. They introduced me to the great people at Stemple Creek who gave me the chance to work in the peaceful and therapeutic environment on their ranch. They also let me try my hand at product sales, which has helped improve my communication skills. I have nothing but great things to say about these amazing people and highly recommend the Ranchin' Vets program to any vet transitioning back into civilian life."

Each Veteran's Day, the organization hosts its annual Bike For Heroes fundraising event. This year's ten mile bike ride takes place on Saturday, Nov. 7, and stretches along Northern California's scenic Highway 1 through the rolling farmlands of West Marin. The ride culminates with a grass-fed beef BBQ lunch hosted by Stemple Creek Ranch. All proceeds raised will go directly to support the Ranchin' Vets program.

All post 9/11 veterans are eligible to apply for admission to the Ranchin' Vets program. Prior experience in agriculture is not required, but applicants must have a willingness to learn through an apprenticeship approach, and are pre-screened for skill sets and prior work experience. Farmers and ranchers with present or future job opportunities who are interested in working with Ranchin’ Vets are encouraged to contact the non-profit.

For more information on hiring a veteran, to sign up for the Bike For Heroes ride or to make a donation supporting the Ranchin' Vets program, visit www.ranchinvets.org.