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## Wounded soldiers welcomed at Noah's Ark

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Supporters and well-wishers lined a path in Locust Grove Thursday to welcome members of the U.S. military into Henry County. Forty members of the Warrior Transition Unit from Fort Benning, Ga., were greeted warmly at Noah's Ark Animal Rehabilitation Center and Children's Care Home.

Jama Hedgecoth, founder and director of Noah's Ark, said the third annual celebration is important to her and her staff, because it enables them to display their appreciation for men and women in the military.

"We love for them to come here, because we like to serve," Hedgecoth said. "Noah's Ark is a ... place for people to come, where we can love them and take care of them. Our military does so much for us, [and] this is just a little bit we can do, to return back to them."

She added that the soldiers, who participate in the annual program, receive private tours of the 40-acre animal habitat. Lunch, she said, was provided by Truett's Grill on Jonesboro Road in McDonough.

The impact on the wounded military personnel, who visit Noah's Ark, according to Hedgecoth, is "incredible."

"A lot of guys, who have never cried before, will get tears running down their face, because they see that we do honor them, and we do appreciate them," the director said. "So many times, when they come back from war, they're not honored. When they come here, they are."

The Warrior Transition Unit, formerly known as the Wounded Warriors Battalion, began its relationship with Noah's Ark after making a donation to the facility in 2008, according to Hedgecoth's assistant, Diane Smith. Smith said the soldiers were amazed by the reception they received, including a police escort from the Henry County Police Department, and crowds of flag-waving well-wishers along the way.

"The [police] officers told us, at that time, that some of the soldiers broke down and cried," Smith said. "I think it's one of the most exciting things we do here, as far as community outreach. It's very emotional, and it's fulfilling to give back to them with all that they've given, because these are the wounded troops."

Soldiers contacted the organization about visiting the shelter in 2008 and 2009, said Smith. This year, however, leaders of the non-profit facility wanted to return the favor, by inviting the veterans, she said.

"They've gone to war, they've been wounded, and they're transitioning back, so this is something that we can do for them," Smith continued. "I think it's been kind of therapeutic ... for them to get to go out and see the different animals that they've probably never gotten close to before."

State Sen. John Douglas (R-District 17) was on hand to welcome the soldiers. "These are wounded soldiers, back from Iraq and Afghanistan," Douglas said. "So, it's important that we show our appreciation for what they've been through, and to welcome them home.

"The word is out that Locust Grove and Henry County are the places for them to come to, for a warm and friendly reception," he said. "We're delighted to be able to do it."

Locust Grove Mayor Lorene Lindsey was among those who organized the military excursion to her city. Soldiers, she said, "have always been very dear to my heart. We wouldn't be here today, if it weren't for our brave ... men and women that go off to save us," Lindsey said. "As long as I live, I will always support them, and do anything I can for them."

Army Master Sgt. Deborah Turner, of Clarksville, Tenn., came to Noah's Ark for the first time Thursday. She injured her knee and back while serving in Afghanistan in 2007.

"Wonderful," is the way Turner described the reaction she received from staff members and others visiting the animal-care center. "It just warms our hearts to see people who actually appreciate us," Turner said. "There's so much [negative] talk about the military. We all have to do our job, and when we see that we're appreciated like this, it just feels great."

The master sergeant added that she was excited about seeing the animals at Noah's Ark. "It's been a while since I've been to a zoo, or seen a whole lot of grass," Turner said. "I was in Afghanistan for two years, so just walking on the grass and seeing the animals is great."

Army Staff Sgt. Ellis Veasley, of Columbus, Ga., walked with a cane as he examined the facility for the first time. Veasley developed difficulties in his spine, feet and knees in August of 2009, and suffers from arthritis, as well as bulging disc in his back.

Still, Veasley wore a proud smile as he expressed his gratitude for Noah's Ark's leaders. "It's a blessing to know that someone really cares, and would go out of their way to do this for the soldiers," he said.

This year marked the second visit for Army Sgt. 1st Class Terry Williams, of Shreveport, La. The cancer survivor said he and his fellow soldiers enjoy coming to Locust Grove each year. "We feel like we've been loved, and we're serving our country for a purpose," he said.

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