

Horses for Heros in Windsor

By Kelly Barlow
Staff writer

WINDSOR — Tom Steele is back in the saddle again. An avid horseback rider and barrel racer, Steele was sidelined three years ago by a stroke that left one side of his body weak and unresponsive.

But Debi Demick, who has worked in riding therapy for 20 years, promised Steele she would get him back on a horse. And she did. Recently, Steele climbed onto Buddy and took a 10-minute ride around the ring at Merry Oaks Stables in Windsor.

With help from Demick, Merry Oaks owner Sonya Reuter, and Lee Moore, a certified instructor for NARHA, the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association, Steele reconnected with the sport he loved.

And Demick found a new calling.

This fall she will begin her "Horses for Heroes" project, which brings to-

gether wounded veterans and active military with horses to help improve balance, muscle strength, posture and confidence.

Horses for Heroes began in 2006 by Walter Reed Army Medical Center and NARHA, but a program wasn't available locally until now, said Demick. "Because we have such a large veteran population here and active duty military, this kind of project needs to get going here," she said. The program is free to vets and military, with the project counting on donations and fundraisers to cover costs.

To get started, Demick contacted the head of a similar program in Richmond to learn more about working with vets and brought Moore in to be an instructor. Reuter offered the facilities at Merry Oaks Stables to the project free of charge. And Steele was one of the first volunteers to sign up to help. As someone who was struck with a



"Horses for Heroes" helped Tom Steele get back in the saddle after suffering from a stroke.

disability later in his adult life, Steele feels he has a lot to offer a veteran suffering a similar fate.

"I can talk to them," said Steele, and offer hope. "It's a weird feeling that one side of my body doesn't work," but he said he never stopped believing that he would ride again.

Demick said his short sessions on Buddy have al-

ready loosened his left arm, which used to be clenched in a bent position, and his posture is greatly improved.

The program will offer help to vets at all ability levels and begin by Labor Day. For information visit www.horseshelpingheroesproject.com.

or call 356-0258 or Sonja Reuter at 846-6076.