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Veterans interact with wolf dogs in therapeutic encounter

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By: Karl Fortier



COLLIER COUNTY, Fla. — Air Force veteran Sarah Blanchette had been looking forward to getting up close and personal with the wolf dogs at the Shy Wolf Sanctuary in Collier County for years. Sunday morning, she finally got her chance.

"A few years ago I wanted to volunteer here, but I had some physical limitations at the time so I just put it off," Blanchette said. "So I've been dying to come here for a really long time."

She jumped at the chance to join more than a dozen other veterans with Home Base Southwest Florida, a group that helps vets overcome the invisible wounds of war such as post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression. The encounter at Shy Wolf with animals like Mohan, a rescued wolf dog, was part of the sanctuary's therapeutic Healing Hearts program.

All of the vets got the chance to pet Mohan, who even gave Blanchette a kiss or two.

"Their eyes are just so deep, and they just come up and give you some love," Blanchette said.

Now that she's learned more about Mohan and the sixty-eight other animals at Shy Wolf, Blanchette feels a special bond with them.



Deanna Deppen, Shy Wolf's executive director, thinks there's a reason veterans like Blanchette feel such a strong connection with the canines.

"They're not wolves, they're not dogs; they're kind of in the middle," Deppen said. "Veterans, I think, feel that way when they come home a lot of times. They're not in the military, but they're not used to being in civilian society."

"Hopefully, they see how well our animals are doing, and they have something to hang onto with that," she added.

Blanchette and her fellow vets brought their elbow grease with them, helping to build features for the sanctuary, such as a swinging bridge for the fox enclosure.

Home Base SWFL program director Armando Hernandez said that it's an important part of the experience for the vets to turn the hands-on project into a social event.

"It really is the first step to self-care," Hernandez said. "Just coming out to an event like this, and getting to meet the staff and other veterans and supporting each other. It's a great opportunity for us to open doors."

Blanchette plans to take full advantage of the open door at Shy Wolf.

"I plan to volunteer immediately," she said. "My daughter is old enough to volunteer as well, so I'm going to sign her up too."

Deppen said they hope to make the veteran encounters with their animals an ongoing experience.

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