

Veteran riders show "power in a shared story"



After Paul Nichols came home from the Balkans after serving with the Canadian Military, he spent some time as an instructor in military courses, before making the transition with his wife out of that ?close support network, that close family? of the armed forces to small town British Columbia.

Quesnel, B.C., was a community that didn't recognize a veteran as being the young man he is ? but Quesnel is not alone. As time went on, Mr. Nichols began to see how he, and others in his situation, were struggling to live outside of the military ?brotherhood? while adjusting to live in their newfound communities.

?I was in a little shop in Vancouver and a woman recognized the regimental crest on my jacket and what it was,? he said. ?She asked me if I was in the Canadian military, I said yes, and she went on to share her story of living through the Siege of Sarajevo. She spent three years living in an underground parking lot, they faced machine gunfire and sniper fire every time they went outside. They were starving, they burnt their furniture to keep warm.

?Her taking that time to share that moment with me was a turning point. I was teared up, she was teared up, and here I have this complete stranger hugging me. I was thinking we were making a scene, but I looked at the lineup behind me and there were six or eight people behind me and they were in tears. I realised right then and there that there is power in a shared story and I have to share it with my brothers. That is what we're doing.?

Aurora provided another page in this shared story on Sunday afternoon as dignitaries, veterans young and old, and members of the public alike gathered at the Royal Canadian Legion to welcome Mr. Nichols, his wife Terry, and their group as they rode in on horseback on the latest leg of their Communities for Veterans Ride Across Canada.

Founded by the couple as a way to raise awareness of the changing face of veterans, as well as the everyday struggles they face in their transition out of military life, particularly Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), they began their journey this past April in Victoria, B.C. Since then, they have welcomed over 100 veterans who have saddled up for the trip in different stops across the Rockies, the Prairies and into Ontario. They hope to reach St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, by November, with over 700 veterans having participated nation-wide.

Helping give the riders a warm welcome was Lieutenant-Governor Elizabeth Dowdeswell, Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario, who was joined by Newmarket-Aurora MPP Chris Ballard, members of the Governor General's Horse Guards, the Royal Canadian Legion Colour Guard, and the York Regional Police's ceremonial mounted unit, who accompanied the riders through the Aurora.

?It is often said there is nothing like a man on horseback riding in from the west to attract attention, and I think that is particularly true today, especially when that man is rallying support for a great cause,? said Ms. Dowdeswell. ?[The Nichols] and their posse

have captured the hearts and imaginations of Canadians with this unique initiative, riding across the country to share stories with veterans and about veterans. I think through sharing their experiences, their strength, and their hope, a new generation of soldier is taking the lead in healing the physical and mental wounds. Our military men and women are reaching out to each other and to civilians in an effort to raise awareness of the increasing PTSD and mental health incidents.?

In her role as the Queen's representative in the Province, the Lieutenant-Governor said she is surrounded every day by members of the military, many of whom are more recent veterans of the Afghan conflict. As she got to know them, she came to appreciate ?at a personal level? the service they have ? and continue to provide ? Canada.

?Often [when] veterans return home from conflict zones, our military men and women are too often sidelined, their sacrifices honoured only on special occasions because, as civilians, we don't often understand who our soldiers really are as husbands, wives, parents and community members,? she said.

?Paul, Terry and the crew are doing a truly remarkable job in advancing our understanding of our veterans' experience when adjusting to civilian life. I think it was Paul himself who said there is power in a shared story. As Lieutenant-Governor, and as a grateful Canadian, it is my honour to listen and learn from our veterans. It is also my honour to offer them my unwavering support. Thank you for lifting us up with courage, dedication and with heart.?