

Veterans saddle up to raise awareness of comrades

By Brock Weir

Paul Nichols served with the Canadian Armed Forces, stationed in Croatia during the early 1990s. During that time, he did 'pretty well' serving his country. However, when he transitioned out of the military, that's when his war really started.

'He wasn't recognized as a veteran,' says his wife, Terry. 'He had a hard time transitioning from military into civilian life and he struggled. We struggled.'

As the family grappled with their new reality in small-town British Columbia, they realised theirs was not a unique story. The Nichols, on the other hand, set out to do something about it.

Horseback riders by trade ' Terry is a therapeutic riding instructor ' the couple have saddled up their horses, founding the Communities for Veterans Foundation, riding across Canada to raise awareness of the changing face of veterans nation-wide ' and raising money to support veterans living with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in conjunction with the Wounded Warrior Foundation.

Riding their horses with fellow veterans spanning British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, the Ride Across Canada is now on its Ontario leg, due to make its way through York Region and South Simcoe August 6 through August 9.

Riders are set to make their entrance in Aurora on Sunday, August 9. Although the local route has yet to be finalized, a portion of the journey is expected to take them from the John West Way area, riding through the Aurora Community Arboretum to the Royal Canadian Legion on Industrial Parkway North, where there will be a community celebration and barbeque, tentatively slated for 1.30 p.m.

'We needed to do something,' says Ms. Nichols of the inspiration behind the journey on horseback. 'We were hearing from people in the military corps how many guys were being lost to suicide, family breakups, and there were more deaths from suicide than from casualties in the military right now. We thought we could make a difference. There is a lack of awareness and support in the community that can make a difference for people. If the community has a greater awareness and they welcome their contemporary veterans back into the community and appreciate the job that is being done, then we can help them.'

This lack of awareness of just what constitutes a 'contemporary veteran' is a point that has been driven home on each leg of their trip, says Terry. As they have traversed the Pacific and the Prairies and spread the word they were riding with veterans, they were asked time and time again, 'How are you going to get all those old guys up on horses?'

By the time they rode in, they saw young men and women ' and, indeed, a few seniors ' come in, united in their mission although separated by their generations.

'They're young men, young women and people from their community who are nurses, mechanics and people that become invisible once they transition out of the military and join their communities,' says Ms. Nichols. 'People are surprised. The average age of the veteran is 46 years old and, to a lot of people, that title of 'veteran' belongs to World War Two veterans. We're wanting to change the perception so people are recognized for the job they do for us.'

'In small town communities across Canada, we don't see war, we don't see military action. When it's not in our face we don't have to think about it. This is an opportunity to show that these people are in every community and they need to be recognized.'

As the trek continues, small communities are continually added to their itinerary as more people hear about ' and back ' their missions. Many of these communities, she said, have shared their view there is a disconnect between contemporary veterans and the communities in which they live.

?To go straight across Canada would have been about 8,000 km and our route is about 11,000 because of going to these different communities that weren't on that direct route,? she says. ?Each community can look totally different. We can have one person we might feel we've totally connected with and there are people whose lives have been changed, or healing has been started from being a part of this ride. We have had people share they now view their father who served in World War Two differently now that they have a better understanding of PTSD and maybe they can forgive him for how he acted when they were children because maybe they didn't realise what he had gone through.

?The very first day we left our home in British Columbia, we had a kickoff parade and had five veterans join us on the day. We had a 92-year-old World War Two veteran who rode with us, a 50-year-old veteran and three Afghanistan veterans. Our city is only about 22,000 people and the Afghanistan veterans had never met each other. That just shows the isolation of veterans returning home from recent tours. Not only did we introduce them to the community as veterans and the community embraced them as such, we also introduced them to each other so now they have more of a support network. That's when we knew this was really going to work ? and it was wonderful.?

For more information about Communities For Veterans' ride across Canada and for more information on their routes, visit communitiesforveterans.ca.