



Andover Townsman

RUN FOR THE TROOPS

SUNDAY, APRIL 3, 2016

Thursday, March 24, 2016



Race director Pennington goes through rough year

Remains upbeat about the cause — building homes for disabled veterans

By BILL KIRK
BKIRK@EAGLETRIBUNE.COM

The people who train under Boston Marathon coach Bill Pennington call him “the devil” because he puts them through hell during every training run leading up to the big event.

But over the past year, the devil himself has been through hell.

It all started last May when he was at Salem State College with a friend, listening to New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady give a speech. Pennington, then 60, felt some tingling in his hand. He felt a little nauseous and dizzy.

“I felt awful,” said Pennington, looking back on last year’s events. “It felt like really bad indigestion. I even took a Tums.”

But an alert friend thought maybe it was something else, and took him to the Lahey Clinic medical facility in Peabody, near the North Shore Mall. They hooked him up to an EKG and could immediately see he was having a heart attack.

He was loaded into an ambulance and whisked off to Lahey’s main facility in Burlington, where he spent the next couple of weeks recovering from surgery that included implanting two stents and a pacemaker.

“What kept me alive is that I had worked out a lot,” he said. “My heart was in good shape. It was the plumbing that was the issue.”

After his release and short convalescence, Pennington spent the summer visiting friends and family, even going to the Midwest to see his son, going on long bike rides.

Just as he was feeling 100 percent, he was diagnosed with having a staph infection at the base of his spine.

He said it was the most



FILE PHOTO

Andover resident Bill Pennington says a few words to the crowd before the start the annual Feaster Five Thanksgiving Day Road Race in Andover. Pennington now oversees the Run For The Troops 5K, also in Andover.

painful experience of his life, and much worse than the heart attack.

“After the heart attack, I was up and running and doing stuff,” he said. Not so with the staph infection.

“After that, it took me until December to get back to about 80 percent of full-strength,” he said. “It really knocked me for a loop. It wasn’t until January that I felt 100 percent. I am completely cleared of any infection now.”

It was an eye-opening experience for someone used to running dozens of miles a week, hopping on the bike, going to spinning classes, and generally leading a very active life.

But he was lucky, he said. He had friends and family members coming and going constantly, taking care of him and keeping his spirits up.

It also gave him some insight into the lives of the many wounded veterans he

has known over the years, thanks in part to his work on the 5K road race, Run for the Troops 5K, which benefits Homes for Our Troops. Injured veterans he knows spend years in hospitals, not just weeks.

Now that he’s back to just about 100 percent, Pennington has once again thrown himself into the Run For Our Troops 5K, a complicated and time-consuming logistical nightmare that requires endless patience and phenomenally good planning.

Pennington said he started the race about 6 years ago because he needed to raise money for the charity program he was involved with as part of the Boston Marathon.

“I had raised money for other charities, including Homes For Our Troops,” he said. So he organized a fun-run in Andover that was attended by about 200 people. They raised \$8,000.

The first year they even had a pancake breakfast - a tradition that returns this year.

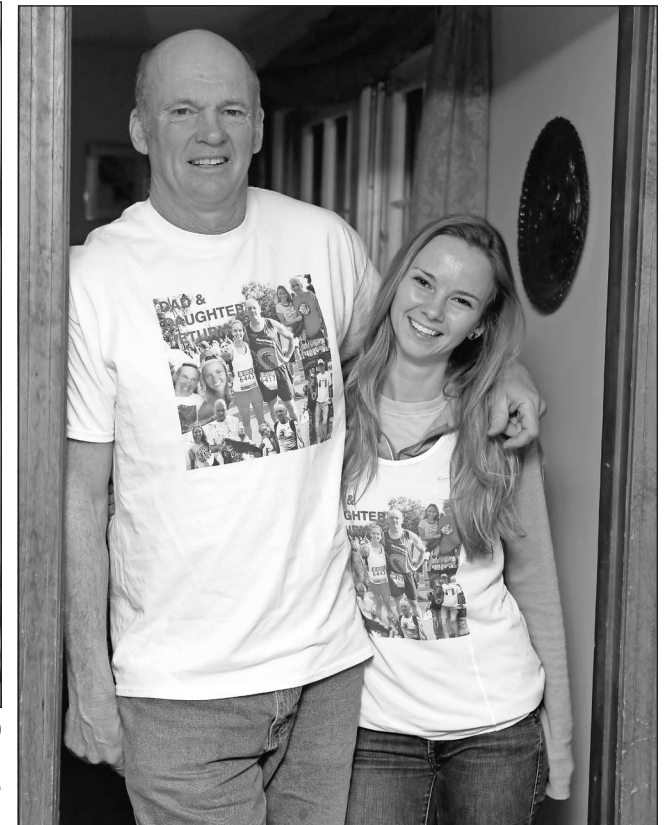
The following year, even more runners attended.

Last year, 2,500 people showed up and this year he expects at least 3,000 as pre-registration is already up by 60 percent over last year.

The race has caught on, he said, because the cause is so good.

“Dave McGillvary (Boston Marathon race director) and I are good friends and we always ask, ‘Why do runners come,’” he said, referring to the popularity of the Run For Our Troops. “It’s April 3. There’s nothing special about the date. The location is nothing special. The distance is nothing special. But it’s the greatest cause in the world.

We emphasize the cause, and the impact it has on veterans, which is why the race has grown. You can see and touch the charity.



FILE PHOTO

Bill Pennington and his daughter, Melissa, in 2014, before the Boston Marathon. They ran it together, wearing matching T-shirts. Melissa helps out with the Run for Our Troops fundraising 5K.

Last year’s facts and figures

2015 RACE DEMOGRAPHICS

- Over 2,500 registered runners and walkers*
 - 85 percent from Massachusetts; 12.5 percent from New Hampshire; registrations from as far away as California, Florida and Illinois
 - Average age range is 30- to 39-years-old
- * This year more than 3,000 are expected.



Andrea Lee holds her daughter Lillianne, 4, who is holding a sign cheering on her dad, David, at the start of the Run for the Troops 5K on Whittier Street.

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Organizing a race not an easy task

Pennington expects 3,000 runners in race that has grown in popularity

By BILL KIRK

bkirk@andovertownsman.com

Run For Our Troops 5K steps off at 9 a.m. on April 3.

It starts at Bartlet Street and loops through Andover's "beautiful neighborhoods," according to a brochure on the event.

The 3.1-mile race is expected to draw about 3,000 runners and walkers, with many more supporters on the sidelines. The opening ceremony will include a helicopter flyover, color guard, bag pipe band, food tables, photo booths, bands, a pancake breakfast, and much, much more.

Running may be the easiest part of the race. The work leading up to it, and the details behind it, seem daunting.

But for Bill Pennington, it's a labor of love.

"I do this in honor of my mother, who is 92 and is a Marine," said Pennington. "She served during World War II and marched in Roosevelt's funeral."

He comes from a military family, having grown up in Rhode Island where his father was stationed. But it wasn't until after college that he caught the running bug, when a fraternity brother challenged him to run a marathon after they graduated. Six months later, they did it and he still remembers his time: 3:17.

Since then, he's run Boston 20 times, his best at 2:41. His personal best was a marathon in Minnesota, where he clocked in at 2:38.

He ended up in Andover after living in Atlanta with his wife for a while.

"We always liked New England, so we moved here,"

he said.

It wasn't long before he got heavily involved in the local running scene, starting the Feaster Five because he liked the way Atlanta always had a race - a half-marathon - on Thanksgiving Day.

"I said, 'We should have one here,'" he said. "We'll give away pies if you get under a certain time. But then a psychiatrist friend of mine suggested we give pies to the last 1,000 runners. So we did, and it took off. Now, everyone gets a pie."

The Run For Our Troops is kind of a natural extension of other races Pennington has been involved with, except for the fact that the cause is so special.

Most of the proceeds of the earnings from the race will go toward Homes For Our Troops, a national organization that builds

homes free-of-charge and free-of-mortgage for disabled veterans.

"Homes For Our Troops is a very credible charity," he said. "It has a 4 to 5 star rating - 91 percent of the money raised goes directly to building houses."

He said he has nothing but respect for the veterans who live in the houses that money from his race helps build.

"The first discussion I ever had with someone who got a home, I asked him what he missed most and he said, 'I miss fighting for my country,'" Pennington recalled.

Now, a number of residents of the homes are good friends of Pennington's. And they have become good friends of people in Andover. Many of them return year after year to the race, where they are supported by friends, family and even strangers.

The dinner on the eve of the race is a big part of the event, as it offers an opportunity to raise more money while also recognizing veterans from near and far.

"We are impacting people who don't necessarily receive a home or get married, just to be recognized is a huge thing," he said.

Other charities will also benefit, including Brides Across America. He said two brides will be at the dinner and may be at the race as well.

Ironstone Farm will have a big team of runners. The farm, a therapy horse farm, is also one of the charity recipients of the race.

The race itself has turned into an event as much as a road race. There will be a pancake breakfast at the Doherty School cafeteria, for a donation of \$5. Outside, a

country-western band will be on a stage, entertaining runners and spectators alike.

There is also a "strong possibility a Blackhawk helicopter will land near the Cormier Youth Center for viewing," he said, adding that he was still working out the details of that.

This year, more than 80 teams have signed up for the race. Any team of 25 or more runners get their own meeting tent. They can bring their own food, he said, adding that it is a good corporate event.

"We provide tent, tables and chairs," he said.

Already, fund-raising is looking good.

"We will exceed the money raised last year," he said, noting that since the race started "we have raised over \$100,000 for houses and other charities. Last year, we donated over \$45,000 to charities."



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Beneficiaries of Run For Our Troops 5K

STAFF REPORT

Run For The Troops 5K expects to raise about \$50,000 this year, with the bulk of the money going to Homes for Our Troops, which builds homes free of charge for disabled veterans around the country.

But the race also donates to other, worthy causes, according to race director Bill Pennington, including Brides Across America, Ironstone Farm's Veterans Experience and the Fisher House.

Here are the recipients of the money raised by the race:

Brides Across America

Brides Across America plays a role in making the dreams of brides and grooms come true by giving a military bride a free wedding gown during a Brides Across America's

Nationwide Gown Giveaway, according to the group's website. Events are held twice a year in partnership with bridal salons across the country. Deployments, financial hardships, and other challenges unique to servicemen and women can make it difficult to plan a wedding."

According to the website: "The organization garnered the attention of ABC's Nightly News in 2011 and 2012, and People Magazine article in 2013. However, the highest honor was received during a 2012 White House event by Michelle Obama and Dr. Jill Biden. The event recognized 20 organizations for their contributions to improving the lives of military families. Brides Across America continues to support wounded warriors, post traumatic stress and employment for veterans."

Locally, last November



Erica Forte, of Wilmington, grabs a banana in the cool-down area after finishing the Run for the Troops 5K in Andover last April 12.

Pennington went to the Operation Wedding Gown giveaway at Tulle Bridal on North Main Street. The happy brides not only got a free designer wedding dress, but two very

lucky military brides also got a \$2,500 gift certificate from Run For Our Troops to help pay for wedding costs. Pennington handed out \$5,000 worth of gift certificates himself.

Fisher House

Some of the money raised in this year's race will go to an organization called Fisher House, which is actually a network of houses located near Veterans Administration hospitals and reserved for the family members of injured veterans being treated at the medical facilities.

"A Fisher House is 'a home away from home' for families of patients receiving medical care at major military and VA medical centers," according to a statement on the Fisher House website. "The homes are normally located within walking distance of the

treatment facility or have transportation available. There are 65 Fisher Houses located on 24 military installations and 24 VA medical centers. Many more houses are under construction or in design."

According to the website, "Fisher Houses are given to the U.S. Government as gifts. Military service secretaries and the Secretary of Veterans Affairs are responsible for the operation and maintenance of the homes. The Fisher House Foundation, Inc., a not-for-profit organization under section 501(c)(3) of the IRS code, builds new houses, and assists in the coordination of private support and encourages public support for the homes."

The best part is that families do not pay to stay at a Fisher House. "Fees at Army, Navy, and Air Force Fisher Houses are

underwritten by Fisher House Foundation," according to the website.

For many families traveling many miles to visit their loved ones in VA hospitals, the network of Fisher House facilities is a god-send.

Homes For Our Troops

Run For Our Troops was started by Pennington as a way to raise money for Homes for our Troops. Pennington said the organization uses almost every penny it raises to help custom-build houses for injured veterans.

According to the organization's website, Homes for Our Troops (HFOT) is a privately funded 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization "building specially adapted, mortgage-free homes nationwide for the most severely injured Veterans from Iraq and

BENEFICIARIES, Page S8

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Joe Smith, disabled vet: 'I love Andover!'

By BILL KIRK
bkirk@eagletribune.com

Joe Smith loves Andover. Just ask him.

"I love the town of Andover," said Smith, 46, a resident of Thomasville, North Carolina. "The only thing that's kept me here is my kids. If it weren't for my kids, I'd move to Andover. Or New Mexico."

Smith, a disabled veteran, lives in a house built by Homes For Our Troops, a non-profit organization that builds customized homes for injured soldiers and their families and also pays their mortgage.

His connection to Andover, of course, is Run For Our Troops, which raised money to pay for construction of his home. He's been to Andover to thank the people who have raised money for his home and he plans on returning this year, as well.

"This house has helped me so I don't have to worry other stuff, I only have to worry about getting better," he said. "I want to thank everybody in Andover. The people in Andover are awesome. Bill Pennington is one of great-est men I've ever met in my life. To go out of his way to do stuff like this for people. ... Homes For Our Troops is an amazing organization."

Smith was deployed in Afghanistan in 2004 when he and his platoon were attacked by Afghan nationals.

"They pushed a 600-pound container on top of me and I got a spinal cord injury," he said. "My spinal cord popped out but didn't break. I was under it for 30 or 40 minutes. They couldn't find me. I was air-lifted to the Army medical center in Germany, where they did emergency surgery on my spine. I couldn't talk or anything. I had a head injury."



Paralyzed in Afghanistan, Sgt. Joe Smith is flanked by friends and supporters as he runs Sunday's Run for Our Troops road race in a wheelchair in 2011. The proceeds of the race would help to build a home for Smith.

He spent the next four years in hospitals.

The house has enabled him to continue with physical therapy, where he is up to

taking 20 steps. Most of his days are spent in a wheelchair, however. But he is getting ready to start school and train for the para-Olympic

archery team.

"This gave me the opportunity to go back to school and get my bachelor's degree," he said.

Currently divorced, his children visit him every other weekend, he said. His 15-year-old daughter cooks for him. But his house, he said, "is great."

"My builder has come in and done all this extra stuff," he said. "The folks at Homes For Our Troops are great. They are awesome. They are on top of it."

Last year, he couldn't make it to the race because he had a pulmonary embolism, which is common for someone in his condition because his legs don't get a lot of exercise and the blood doesn't circulate.

But he doesn't dwell on the negative. An upbeat and positive man, Smith is looking forward to the first weekend in April.

"I'm so excited to come up and see the people of Andover and help this other vet," he said. "This is as good as it's going to get. It's OK. I'm still here. I'm not dead."

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Newest adapted home to be built in New Bedford

By JUDY WAKEFIELD
jwakefield@andovertownsman.com

Army Sergeant Christopher Gomes, a New Bedford native, was convoying back to his base in southern Baghdad when his vehicle was hit with four explosives. The blast resulted in the loss of his right leg and severe damage to his left leg.

That was Oct. 29, 2008, and Gomez has undergone more than 10 surgeries and several months of rehabilitation therapy since then. He now wears a prosthetic leg and continues his battle of living a life without a limb.

"Those who donate to and support Run for the Troops may not be able to replace lost limbs but you help wounded service members live a life where they don't have to be completely dependent on others," he said.



Christopher Gomes, most recent recipient of a home from the charity Homes for Our Troops. The 5K fundraiser Run for Our Troops raises money to pay for construction of the house.

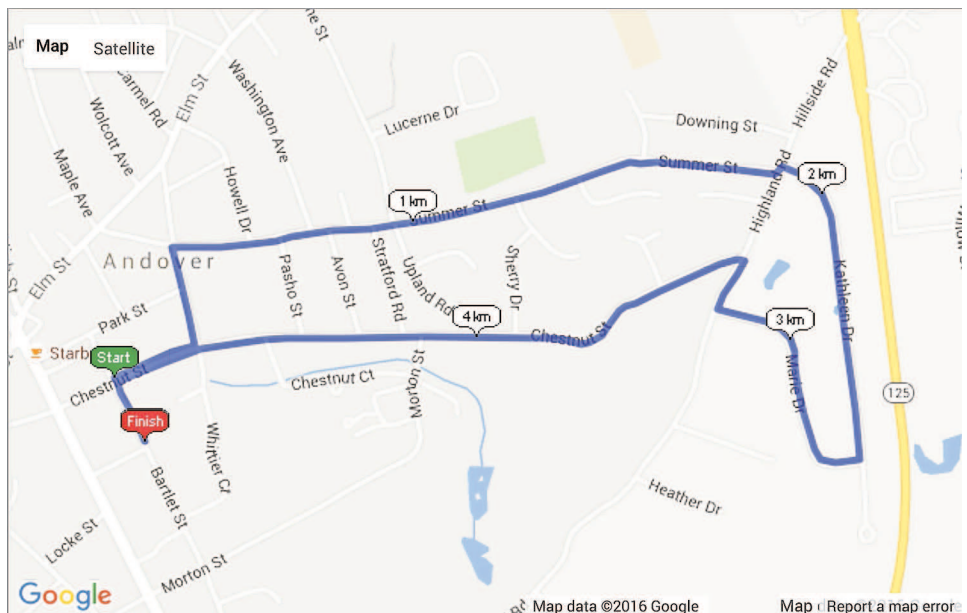
Gomes' new mortgage-free, adaptable and accessible home will be built in his hometown of New Bedford where he lives with his wife, Leslie - also an Army veteran - and their son, Blake. Gomes, who enjoys carpentry, plans to finish his degree in counter terrorism studies.

Past recipients of homes built by Homes For Our Troops

- 2011: Army Sergeant Joseph Smith of Thomasville, N.C.
- 2012: Marine Sergeant Joshua Bouchard of Granby, Mass.
- 2013: Marine Corporal Kevin Dubois of Coventry, R.I.
- 2014: Army Staff Sergeant Matt DeWitt of Hopkinton, N.H.
- 2015: Marine Staff Sergeant Hans Blum of San Antonio, Texas



Cpl. Kevin Dubois, center, starts the first leg of the Run for the Troops 5K in his wheelchair as his son Elijah David, left, is pushed by Dubois' wife Kayla. Dubois was the 2013 recipient of a Homes for Our Troops residence.



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IMAGE COURTESY OF GOOGLE MAPS

The basics

RUN FOR THE TROOPS 2016

DATE: Sunday, April 3

TIME: 9 a.m.

COURSE: Certified 3.1 miles starting at Bartlet Street, looping through Andover neighborhoods.

PARTICIPANTS: 3,000 runners and walkers, with many more supporters cheering on the sidelines.

ACTIVITIES: Opening ceremony including a flyover, color guard and bag pipe band, food tables, photo booths, bands, etc.



Cadets in the NECC Methuen Police Academy chant in unison as they finish the last leg of the Run for the Troops 5K.

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SPECIAL TO THE TOWNSMAN

EXIT Realty Beatrice Associates and Tristian Shannon, Realtor, are proud to be a title sponsor of the Run for the Troops 5k event in Andover this year.

"I feel it's my duty to support the community that provided so much to me while I was growing up," said Shannon, an Andover local who graduated from Andover High with several classmates that are not only active duty, but also veterans - making this cause one close to his heart.

"Bill Pennington said something the first time we met that stuck with me," Shannon recalled. "The money we raise will go directly to the people who need it the most, the troops; not to build memorials or statues, but to the men



Members of the Lawrence High School JROTC head down Whittier Street in Andover at the start of the Run for the Troops 5K. Last year, the race was held April 12. This year, it goes off at 9 a.m. on April 3. The starting line is near Andover Town Offices, 36 Bartlet St., Andover.

and women that sacrificed everything so that we can live in this great country.

"From that moment I knew that Bill's mission aligned with my own and EXIT's. I am proud to offer all active and Veteran military a program through EXIT Realty Beatrice Associates called Local Hometown Heroes, which provides a 25 percent commission rebate to those who served.

"EXIT Realty Beatrice Associates is thrilled to be a title sponsor for the Run for the Troops 5k for many years to come."

Shannon said EXIT does not currently have an office in Andover but would be opening one very soon, probably on Central Street.

A runner himself, Shannon has taken part in the Colleen Ritzer memorial race but never the Run For the Troops 5K. He won't run this year, either, because he



Runners, participants, organizers and supporters turn to the American flag during the singing of "The Star-Spangled Banner" at the opening ceremonies of the Run for the Troops 5K.

said he'll be too busy as key sponsor of the event.

He noted that the company will be paying for the pre-race dinner as well as the pancake breakfast.

"We pretty much pay for the whole thing," he said.

Shannon said the notion

of giving back was instilled in him since high school, where teachers and mentors urged students to help their communities.

"My whole thing is giving back - giving back to the community," he said. "Once I finally graduated, and

started working, I began see what those people were talking about, about giving back."

His Hometown Hero program is built around that idea - helping veterans by offering rebates when they buy their homes.

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BENEFICIARIES

■ Continued from Page S5

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"Most of these veterans have sustained injuries including multiple limb amputations, partial or full paralysis, and/or severe traumatic brain injury (TBI). These homes restore some of the freedom and independence our Veterans sacrificed while defending our country, and enable them to focus on their family, recovery, and rebuilding their lives.

"Since its inception in 2004, nearly 90 cents of every dollar donated to Homes for Our Troops has gone directly to our program services for Veterans. HFOT builds these homes where the Veteran chooses to live, and continues its relationship with the Veterans after home delivery to

assist them with rebuilding their lives."

Every year, a number of recipients of homes built by the organization attend the race.

Ironstone Farm's Veterans Experience

Ironstone Farm, a horse-therapy center at 450 Lowell St., Andover, has branched out and is now conducting programs for injured veterans.

According to the group's website, "Veterans who have experienced trauma and anxiety say a program involving the horses at Ironstone Farm has been better therapy for them than anything else they've done since returning from combat.

"It can be challenging for veterans returning from combat to return to their civilian

lives. Veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress have high rates of unemployment, poverty, homelessness and abuse. The equine encounter at Ironstone Farm is meant to help veterans adjust to their non-combat lives."

According to a story on the organization's website, "Ironstone's program was created by University of New Hampshire Kinesiology Professor Pam McPhee and Paul Smith, Ph.D, a faculty member of Prescott College and director of Centaur Leadership Services; it was adapted for veterans with the help of former Navy Seal Dave Ferruolo, then a master of social work student. Following a successful pilot program in the spring of 2013, Ironstone Farm has been offering additional programs as funding has allowed."

Pre-race dinner always a big draw

By JUDY WAKEFIELD
jwakefield@andovertownsmen.com

The pre-race dinner for the Run for the Troops 5K is sold out as some 400 folks are attending and that's all who can fit in the grand ballroom at Andover Country Club.

The dinner is Friday, April 1 at 6 p.m. featuring a silent auction and dinner, and most likely a carbohydrate-heavy menu for all those runners taking part in the 5K on Sunday, April 3.

What's different this year is the dinner's guest list. Dinner organizer Diana Kiesel of Yang's Fitness Center in Dundee Park, said about 100 dinner guests are veterans.

"That is the most veterans the dinner has ever had," she said, noting that Andover has hosted a

pre-race dinner since the race started in 2010.

A key reason for the strong veteran presence this year is because of the generous members of Yang's. Members took part in fundraising for the dinner and raised about \$1,500. That money was used to buy dinner tickets for veterans. Veterans get a complimentary dinner ticket which normally costs \$40.

The fitness club has always been a strong supporter of Run for the Troops 5K and is fielding a 60-person team this year.

This year's guest speaker at the dinner is Christopher Gomes, who lost a leg in Iraq, and is this year's recipient of a new home. (See related story on Gomes.)



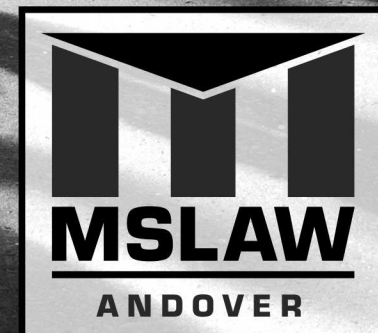
Recipients of homes paid for by Homes For Our Troops gathered at the annual, pre-race dinner in 2013. At left is Josh Bouchard, a Marine veteran who was the recipient of a home in 2012. He was with Kevin and Kayla Dubois, who received a home in 2013. Kevin is also a wounded Marine veteran.

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Ironstone Derby 5K and party helps Andover nonprofit

Afternoon race/walk, Kentucky Derby party at horse farm Saturday, May 7

SPECIAL TO THE TOWNSMAN

Merrimack Valley residents looking for a fun way to celebrate the Kentucky Derby this May can join a race and party at an Andover horse farm.

Ironstone Farm in Andover will host the "Ironstone Derby," an afternoon 5-kilometer charity race-and-walk followed by a Kentucky Derby party— all on the day of the Kentucky Derby, Saturday, May 7. It benefits the nonprofit work at Ironstone Farm that helps children with special needs, veterans and others. Register at www.lightboxreg.com/

ironstone_2016.

Ironstone Farm Veterans Experience, a free program for veterans who have experienced trauma, also is supported by the Run for the Troops road race in Andover. (See related story.)

The Ironstone Derby day starts with a stick-horse race for kids at 4 p.m., followed by the 5K race and walk at 4:30 p.m. Then, there's an after-party, all at Ironstone Farm on Route 133 in Andover, Mass. Run or walk the race, then enjoy the Kentucky Derby party on the horse farm. Some people come just for the party! Eat, play games, see Ironstone's horse-and-rider drill team perform, pick a favorite horse and watch the Kentucky Derby live on a big screen after the race!

Race day is Saturday, May 7, and the race motto is "Run for the Roses - Stay for the Party!"

The Ironstone Derby 5K is a USATF-certified race. Runners and walkers who sign up by April 22 are guaranteed to receive a free short-sleeve tech shirt. Children 10 and under who run the stick-horse races will receive a free T-shirt. There are fun games and prizes for everyone after the road race, with face painters and a magician for children.

Entry fees for the 5K are \$25 for adults and \$20 for youth 12 and younger. The cost is \$10 for the kids stick-horse run. Register at www.lightboxreg.com/ironstone_2016. Online registration will end Friday, May 6 at 11 a.m. There will be race-day registration on Saturday. Team registration is encouraged. There is a separate cost to eat at



Runners, walkers and partiers doing the 2016 Ironstone Derby 5K & Kentucky Derby Party will start and finish the race at Ironstone Farm's horse farm on Route 133 in Andover.



Kids ride their own stick horses during the kids race at the Ironstone Derby.



IRONSTONE DERBY 5K & KENTUCKY DERBY PARTY



**Saturday,
 May 7
 Ironstone Farm
 Andover**



*Stick-horse
 race
 for kids*

Register, learn more at IronstoneFarm.org/derby



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 visit IronstoneFarm.org/videos

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the optional barbecue, but everyone is welcome to the party regardless.

Prizes will be awarded for the largest team and the team that is most creatively dressed for the Ironstone Derby -- think derby hats! Individual prizes including roses and Burtons Grill gift certificates will be awarded to top three male and female finishers. The top

12-and-younger 5K runners also receive a prize.

The race benefits the nonprofit work of Challenge Unlimited Ironstone Farm, which serves children with special needs, combat veterans, people diagnosed with cancer, adults with special needs, teens at risk, elders with memory issues and others. Learn more at www.ironstonefarm.org.

Ironstone Farm benefits from Run for the Troops

SPECIAL TO THE TOWNSMAN

Run for the Troops not only helps build specially adapted homes for injured veterans, it also helps combat veterans to get their lives back on track.

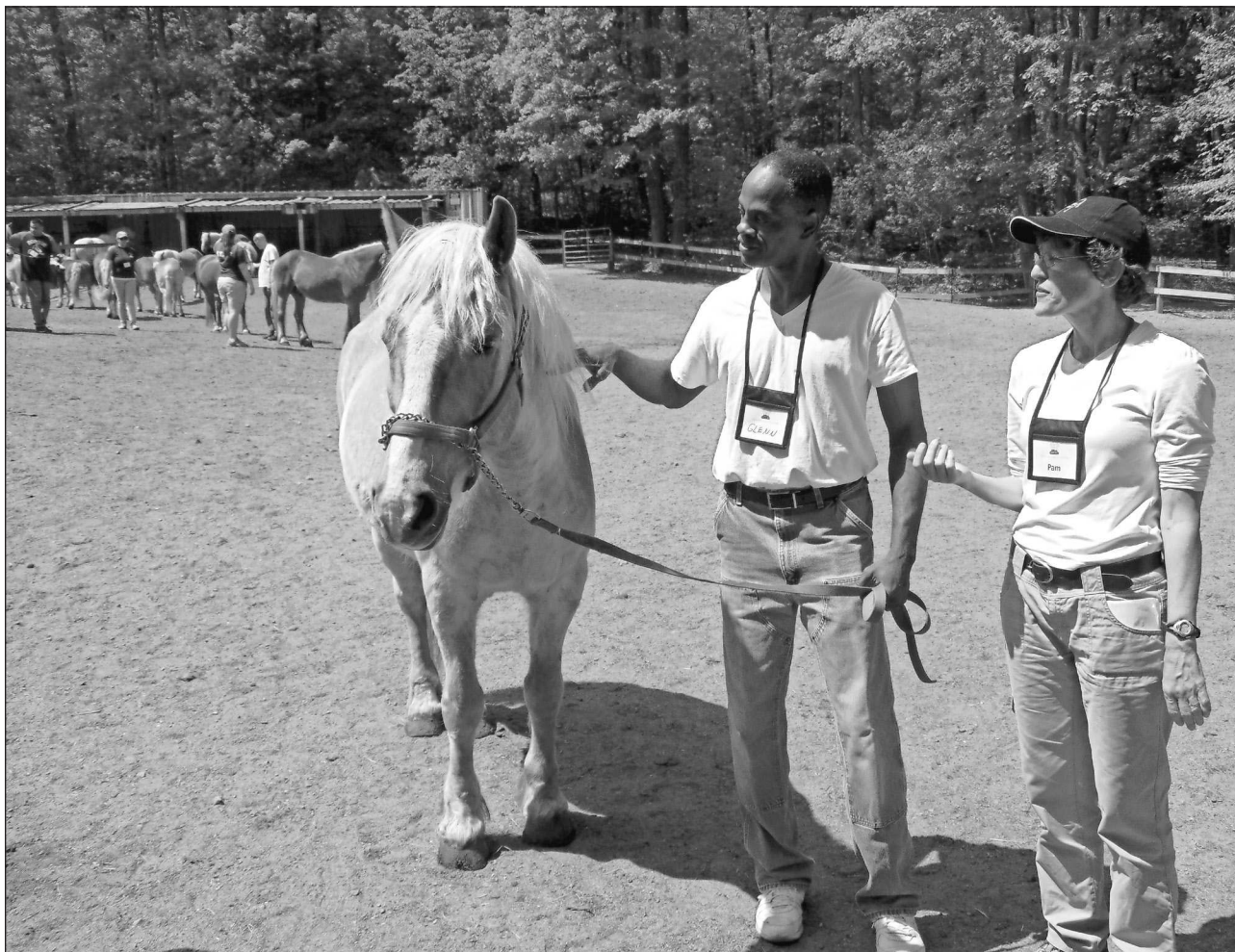
Since 2014, a growing amount of the money raised by each Run for the Troops race has been donated to Andover's Ironstone Farm, helping to support free retreats for veterans who have experienced trauma.

"Ironstone has built a tremendous reputation for helping people – and helping veterans through its Veterans Experience," says Bill Pennington, RFTT race founder.

Massachusetts Secretary of Veterans Affairs Francisco Urena toured Ironstone Farm earlier this month to discuss ways to assist more veterans, describing the day as a "great visit." Then-U.S. Assistant Secretary for Health, Dr. Howard Koh, America's top doctor in the Obama administration, also spent hours at Ironstone Farm in 2014 to learn more and offer advice about the program.

"We added post-traumatic stress and other reintegration issues to our scope because we know our soldiers' injuries are not just to their bodies and limbs," says Pennington. "Ironstone Farm is also a local nonprofit organization and so many of our supporters are from the Merrimack Valley."

Run for the Troops organizers also have teamed with Ironstone Farm to help raise awareness of the Ironstone Derby, a charity 5K race, party and barbecue on Saturday, May 7, the day of the Kentucky Derby (see related story). The race and party will be at the horse farm this year, at 450 Lowell St. (Route 133), in Andover. All money raised will support



Courtesy photo

Facilitator Pam McPhee talks with an Air Force veteran during a Veterans Experience at Ironstone Farm.

Ironstone Farm's nonprofit programs for children with special needs, veterans and others.

Retreats for veterans

For decades, Ironstone Farm's nonprofit programs have used the power of horseback riding to combine several therapies into one highly effective experience for children with special needs.

Ironstone's veterans program started in April 2013. Several of the veterans who attended the first two-day retreat called it the most effective program they had encountered since returning home, and three began volunteering at Ironstone. [Interviews with the veterans can be found at www.ironstonefarm.org/videos]. The Ironstone program

was the cover story of the fall 2013 issue of "Combat Stress," a quarterly publication of the American Institute for Stress.

Veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress have high rates of unemployment, poverty, homelessness and abuse. The Veterans Experience is open to all veterans, free of charge, to help with a variety of reintegration issues.

War on Terror combat veteran Clinton Strong attended the first retreat and said he often used fear and intimidation to get what he wanted, barking orders. That didn't work with the horses — and the Ironstone retreat helped him to realize it wasn't working well with other people either.

"It's kind of hard to

intimidate a 1,000-pound animal," Strong laughed a few months after his retreat. "It was a whole lot simpler when I wanted it to do, when I led by example."

He became an Ironstone Farm volunteer, one of the 200 volunteers each week who help its nonprofit programs provide therapy to special needs children and others. Deedee O'Brien, Ironstone Farm executive director, points to him as a real success story, and Strong has connected other veterans to Ironstone. One now helps facilitate the Veterans Experience.

The Veterans Experience blueprint was created by University of New Hampshire Kinesiology Professor Pam McPhee and Paul

Smith, Ph.D, a faculty member of Prescott College and director of Centaur Leadership Services; and it was adapted for veterans with the help of former Navy Seal Dave Ferruolo, who was pursuing advanced degrees.

"The retreats are effective and they're very supportive of the veterans. In

some cases they've been life-changing. It's different for everyone," says Deedee O'Brien, Ironstone Farm's executive director. "We appreciate the support of Run for the Troops in supporting these experiences for veterans."

Mission objective

Ironstone Farm is open six days a week, 12 months a year. Veterans Experiences are offered every Tuesday and Thursday, although Ironstone Farm is flexible to offering programs at other times to fit the needs of veterans. The program is expected to expand to include first responders.

A benefit of the program is that it can also provide veterans with the opportunity to connect as volunteers with the other nonprofit programs at Ironstone Farm. For instance, veterans may help lead horses while therapists assist children with special needs, for instance.

"Veterans returning from combat duty – or any duty – have universally expressed that they are trained to perform a mission. When they come out, it's hard to find a mission to be committed to, we've learned," said O'Brien. "One of our goals is to engage them and give them meaning and channel their energy in a positive way. And this piece of the program is at no cost to anyone."

To learn more visit <http://ironstonefarm.org/veterans-experience/>.



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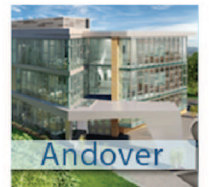
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- ✓ Fatigue (tiredness)
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