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Veterans find peace working on San Diego-area farm

By JACOB ADELMAN (AP) – 4 days ago

VALLEY CENTER, Calif. — When Carlos Rivera returned from fighting in Iraq and found work as an electrician, he felt co-workers who knew about his military experience were gawking at him. He went home angry each day.

That's not a problem at his current job working alongside other combat veterans picking avocados, mixing organic fertilizers and gathering basil amid northern San Diego County's undulating ochre hills.

"I'm outdoors, not stuck inside somewhere feeling suffocated," said Rivera, 25, who returned from Iraq in 2007 after four years as a Marine. "There's always someone to talk to, someone there to understand."

Rivera works at Archi's Acres, a 3-acre high-tech organic farm owned by Colin Archipley, who served three tours in Iraq and is trying to help other combat vets shake the trauma of war by turning swords to plowshares.

Working the earth has long been recognized as good therapy for war veterans. About 20 U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs centers have gardening programs, said Anthony Campinell, the VA's national director for work therapy programs. He said Archi's Acres is the only fully commercial enterprise of which he was aware.

Veterans have grown fruits, vegetables and flowers on a 12-acre parcel at the VA hospital in west Los Angeles since 1986. They sold their produce at farmers markets until April, when administrators had them take a break while they work out a deal for a nonprofit group to take over the commercial parts of that program.

Patients at the Veteran Affairs Medical Center near Newark, N.J., meanwhile, work in a 2-year-old garden harvesting corn, rhubarb and collard greens, some of which are served at the hospital's cafe.

"How much better can one feel about themselves than if you can make a meal out of things that you grew?" said UCLA psychiatry professor C. Scott Saunders, who specializes in treating post-traumatic stress disorder among combat veterans.

Archipley, 28, whose unit took part in the initial invasion of Iraq and the later decisive battles in Fallujah and Haditha, returned from battle in 2006 too agitated to pursue plans to sell houses.

Instead, he decided to try his hand at farming, despite having no background in agriculture. He and his wife Karen started with the 200 avocado trees left on the property they bought while he was still a Marine sergeant.

Realizing the trees were not enough to sustain a business, the Archipleys added herbs and leafy greens grown using hydroponics, a method of cultivating plants without soil that requires less water and land than traditional farming.

The balmy air in Archipley's sunlit greenhouse is thick with the aroma of basil, bunches of which poke through holes in long plastic tubes arranged in vertical rows. Thin streams of water enriched with a potent "compost tea" run silently along the bottoms of the tubes.

Wrinkled leaves of chard and deep-green lettuces sprout outside the greenhouse.

Archipley said he knew other vets would be solid employees and they would benefit from the distraction provided by steady, regimented labor, just as he had.

"When our hands stop working and our minds start running, that's when bad things start to happen. So we keep the work load heavy. We stay busy," he said. "For me, if I slow down, if I stop doing what I'm focussed on, that's when I can get myself in trouble."

Archipley said he thinks his workers are soothed by the farm's rural atmosphere, since the noise and pace of city life might remind them of the urban battle zones where many fought.

Jeffery Scanlon, who places veterans at Archi's Acres as manager of the VA's work therapy programs in San Diego, said working with plants appears to help war-rattled vets regain their self-confidence.

"The plants aren't talking back to them," he said. "You feel more in touch with something that doesn't give you what we would consider negative feedback."

Archipley pays a fee to the VA to cover salaries and placement program expenses. The VA takes care of the workers' insurance, health care and other costs.

Archipley's staff has grown from two to eight since he began hiring the veterans, and he recently bought an adjacent three-acre parcel where he plans more greenhouses and outdoor growing facilities.

AP Associated Press

Photo 2 of 6



In this photo taken Tuesday Dec. 8, 2009, Colin Archipley, a Marine veteran who spent three tours in Iraq, loads basil for delivery in a green house at his farm in Valley Center, Calif. Archipley trains and hires veterans to work the farm. (AP Photo/Lenny Ignelzi)



Map



The farm's growth is being sustained by demand for its products, which are sold at area Whole Foods outlets, other grocery stores and farmers' markets.

Scanlon said he has spoken with VA administrators about replicating the collaboration with the farm in other parts of the country. The emphasis on greenhouse cultivation makes it a model for areas too cold for year-round field farming, he said.

Campinell said he's open to that idea, but his department would need to find other hydroponic farms that want to hire veterans, since the VA doesn't set up new businesses.

The veterans at Archipley's operation, meanwhile, appear grateful for the opportunity to put down their own roots in civilian life.

"This type of work, gardening, getting your hands in the mix, it all helps," said Anthony Licon, whose 21 years in Army and Marines special operations forces took him to trouble spots in the Middle East, Central America and other locations.

Rivera said talking with customers at farmers markets has helped him the most.

"I'm dealing with people and looking them in the eye and learning how to be happy around people," he said.

"The other jobs I had, I used to just go home and be angry," he continued. "Now I actually look forward to work."

On The Net:

Archi's Acres: <http://www.archisacres.com>

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