

Conejos Clean Water Hosts Veterans

Pinon Coffee, flower-infused cheese balls, Amish Fried Pies and a stick-to-the-ribs beef, potatoes and veggie dinner delighted guests of Conejos Clean Waters' Veterans Fields debut event at Café del Valle Saturday night. Veterans of all ages, along with their friends and family showed up in Antonito Saturday night to enjoy the locally sourced meal and learn more about the new Veteran to Farmer project in the SLV. Conejos Clean Water and its Valleybound Garden are part of a larger effort of the Veterans Coalition of the SLV (VCSLV) and the San Luis Valley Local Foods Coalition (LFC) to provide a menu of agricultural opportunities to Veterans.

“It can be getting together with other Veterans in the shade of a cottonwood tree on a farm all the way to creating an agricultural business of your own,” stated Iraq war Veteran Keith Smith. The idea for the project came after a showing of the film documentary “Ground Operations” last year. As the film shows, veterans sometimes flounder in post-service civilian life. Depression, anxiety, anger or even greater challenges like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injury can plague returning servicemen and woman. These challenges can make for a hard time for veterans transitioning back to their civilian lives and careers. In recent years, thousands of veterans like Smith have showed an interest in farming as a way to find peace and purpose.

In a rural and agricultural region like the SLV, there is an abundance of veterans. It is estimated that 10% of the population are veterans and that 5% of them are women veterans. Many come to the SLV to get away from people and to hide. Others come back home to farms and ranches that have been in their family for generations.

Abe Rosenberg, co-director of Conejos Clean Water lined up three of his Veteran Farmer Board members to speak at the gathering. Korean Veteran Alfonso Abeyta talked about how soldiers fight shoulder-to-shoulder in the war zone regardless of race or creed and then how sad it is to come back to a country that practices racism and hate over the very freedoms they fought for.

He has also taken up the effort to make Cannabinoids (cbd's) available and affordable to veterans as well as the greater community. Abeyta grows hemp on his farm and was part of the successful effort to legalize hemp growing in Colorado. He talked about the astronomical price of cbd imports and how Colorado can become a leader in the production of affordable medicinal hemp products.

The next speaker was well known wild-crafter and forager Maury Grimm and she agreed that during 20 years in the army she saw folks of all kinds work together. That didn't preclude her experiences with sexual harassment in the military, however she extoled the discipline and skills that she learned during her service. Discipline that has served her well as she built her garden, raised her chickens, grew her knowledge of wild edible plants and developed hundreds of delicious recipes from them. She brought wild seed crackers, flower-infused cheese balls and “I just weeded my garden salad” to share with the participants.

Lastly was Reyes Garcia who served in Vietnam and dearly reverts his first amendment rights. "I hate war and I hope I am not offending anyone, but I believe in free speech and am going to use it right now." As many experienced there was a lot of disillusionment during the Vietnam war and Garcia came back angry. It was his labor over the old-fashioned acequia irrigation system on his family's sixth generation 800 acre ranch on the Conejos River bottom that healed him.

These are the types of experiences that the Veteran Fields project hopes to offer veterans in the San Luis Valley. Small garden and farm plots are available at ValleyBound Garden in Antonito as well as at the Rio Grande Farm Park in Alamosa. Organizers are working with farmers to build internships on our vast agricultural lands.

There are other ways to get involved too. On September 23rd Adams State University will hold a similar informational dinner at the ASU Field House Restaurant with retired Marine Colonel and Organic Farmer John Kretsinger speaking.

Veteran Fields will hold a "Learning Community" event facilitated by ASU professor and family rancher Armando Valdez on October 27th at a location to be determined.

The Veteran Fields team meets most Wednesday mornings at the LFC office at 9am. The Veterans Coalition holds a coffee every Thursday morning at the SLV Museum and the Women Veterans hold a second Saturday meeting every month.