

Charlotte Cox-Turner volunteers at Serenity Equine Rescue near Maple Valley on May 10. She has found healing by doing this work after her son Neil was killed in a reckless accident in Afghanistan in 2012. **Peter Haley** phaley@thenewstribune.com



BY ADAM ASHTON

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Anguished over her oldest son's death in Afghanistan in 2012, Charlotte Cox-Turner drove by his grave week after week on her way to the ranch where she could help herself heal.

Her heart hurt when she passed Pfc. Neil Turner at the Tahoma National Cemetery in Kent.

She kept going, knowing the hours she spent — shovel in hand at a Maple Valley farm, cleaning stalls and feeding horses — would get her through the day.

"I noticed every time I came home after working, I'd feel a little better," she said. "It was like burning off grief. I was working so hard."

One morning, she felt herself emerging from the depression that hung over her long after Neil's death. With tears still pouring, she leaned into a horse so big the ground seemed to shake when he walked.

He let her cry on him. Comforted by her silent friend, she was ready to look forward to her own life again.

"I never thought I would come back," Charlotte said. "I thought that my heart was shut and irreparably closed, and I thought it wouldn't heal up. (The horses) taught me my heart still works. Because of their tenderness, it taught me I still have a heart."

Four years after Neil Turner's death in a maddeningly reckless accident, his parents and three younger brothers are leaving a dark time behind them as they learn to live without a young man from East Tacoma who once seemed invincible.

Charlotte, 55, found peace with horses and by caring for soldiers who knew her son. Her husband, Leland, 64, held his family together in moments when he feared sadness would break them apart.

Brother Maxwell, 23, lost a year to his own depression, but found strength in work, music and friends.

Jordan, 19, followed his dad's lead and tried to look strong for the family. He's in college and pursuing big dreams.

Youngest brother Tucker, 15, doesn't like to talk much about Neil. But even he recently wrote an essay about his brother that moved a teacher to tears.

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Finding serenity

One of Charlotte's sisters in Minnesota suggested she find time to volunteer with horses, hoping the physical activity would provide a kind of therapy.

Charlotte had not been around horses much in years, but liked the idea.

She knew she found the right place when she visited [Serenity Equine Rescue in Maple Valley](#). It's a nonprofit ranch Patricia Clark runs to nurse abandoned and neglected horses back to health.

Charlotte took to the horses and wanted to care for them.

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Charlotte Cox-Turner

Dante, a heavy-footed black Friesian, stood out to her. Someone in California had tried to adopt him before it was safe to separate him from his mother. Dante got sick and wound up at Serenity when the buyer decided to go with another horse.

Charlotte liked his history. They became friends.

"Dante is the first horse I connected with," she said. "He's heard a lot of my grief."

Other volunteers noticed Charlotte showed up three or four times a week, but mostly did not want to talk to them. Instead, she silently minded the horses.



Pfc. Neil Turner in Afghanistan. He was killed in a reckless accident in Afghanistan in 2012. **Turner family** Courtesy

Today, she's a favorite friend to the farm and to her fellow volunteers.

"You were pretty closed off then, and you're a whole different person now," Clark told her on a visit this month.

Charlotte always felt an almost psychic connection with Neil. She worried tremendously when he joined the Army. She had a bad feeling, like a premonition. In her nightmares after his death, she felt as if she was in Neil's place when the rocket fired.

"As a parent, when it happens to your child, it happens to you. It was hard not to be there in his last moments," she said.

Those dark dreams faded as she spent more time on the farm. Surprisingly, she began to feel Neil's presence with her as she grew stronger.

"In that first couple of years, I felt extremely distant," she said. "There was this impassible gulf with my son." "Now, I actually feel closer to Neil, and I thought, 'How could that be?'

"I feel like he's telling me, 'Mom, the grief was so bad you couldn't feel anything. I was always there.' "

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