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Jewish volunteers spend Christmas lending a hand

By **BRIAN EASON** | brianeason@denverpost.com | The Denver Post
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While millions awoke to presents under the tree, Lisa Siegel spent her Christmas morning ... well, perhaps it's best to let her explain.

"It's primarily, for want of a better word, it's poop. It's horse poop and cow poop," Siegel said. "We've been cleaning up the pastures."

Not that she's complaining. She signed up for this, as one of the more than 300 JEWISHColorado volunteers scattered at 17 sites across the Denver area on Christmas Day.

"We do this so that the other people that celebrate other holidays can spend time with their families," said Susan Chayet, a spokeswoman for the group. "It's a way of giving back."

Siegel and nine others spent Christmas morning at [Zuma's Rescue Ranch](#) in Littleton, picking up what the animals left behind. Others lent a hand at hospitals, nursing homes and shelters as part of JEWISHColorado's annual Christmas Mitzvah charity event.

"We tend to be home. So rather than just sit at home and eat Chinese food and go to the movies — we'll be doing that later — but this way we can help the community," Siegel said. "Our Christian friends, they want to be home with their families."

Siegel and her group of volunteers were assigned to a horse rescue, founded by Paul and Jodi Messenich. They adopt horses that were abused, as well as some that belonged to families that simply couldn't afford to keep them.

The rescue was named after their daughter's late horse, Zuma, who was wild and hard to control when they adopted her.

"The trainers wouldn't handle her. Everyone told me to put her down, she was dangerous," Jodi Messenich said. "And I wasn't going to give up. When I take something into my home, it's a family member."

After a year and half, Zuma came around; their daughter eventually was able to ride her at competitions.

Working with Zuma, Jodi said, "transformed a corporate, working family" into something else. When they got the ranch, they had planned to board show horses. But after Zuma died, they adopted seven rescues. And things snowballed from there. Today, the ranch is typically home to 40 horses at a time.

And it's become much more than a haven for neglected animals. In 2008, the couple partnered with the University of Denver to provide animal-assisted therapy to at-risk kids with mental disorders. Now they see 20 to 30 kids a week.

"They have similar stories of abandonment and neglect and (post-traumatic stress disorder)," Jodi Messenich said. "The horses have been abused, the kids have been abused. So the kids really gravitate toward these horses."

Soon, they'll add adults to their practice — veterans who suffer from PTSD. That's a group that's close to Jodi's heart. Her father, a World War II and Korean War veteran, was thrown from a tank by a landmine on one tour of duty. His foot was blown off. His fellow soldiers were killed.

Back in the U.S., Jodi had to wake her father up with a broomstick; she was scared to get too close, because "he would deck you."

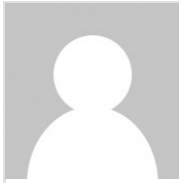
"I think once you've seen it, it's hard to look the other way," Paul Messenich said.

With the kids, they use the horses to create stressful conditions in a safe environment. That's something they believe they can replicate with veterans who suffer from similar mental disorders.

"It gives you an opportunity to give them skills to deal with it, when they're actually experiencing an issue," he said. Through therapy, they can connect synapses in the brain — help them learn how to cope with stress in a positive manner.

"It's all made possible with groups like the group that's out here today," Jodi Messenich said. "If the community didn't come in, support and volunteer and help offset my staffing costs, we could never do it."

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Brian Eason

Statehouse reporter Brian Eason joined The Post from the Indianapolis Star, where he covered city hall for the news outlet's watchdog team beginning in 2014. Before that, he was an investigative reporter at The Clarion-Ledger in Jackson, Miss., and covered local government at The Leaf-Chronicle in Clarksville, Tenn. He graduated in 2009 from the University of Missouri with degrees in journalism and political science.

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