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LIFESIDE FARMS

Connecting people with the outdoors

By **KATHERYN HOUGHTON**
Daily Inter Lake

A Kalispell home-care agency has gained national recognition for connecting people with mental, aging and physical disabilities to a community outdoors.

A Plus Health Care initiated Lifeside Farms three years ago with a handful of clients visiting farms once a week. By 2016, the program had grown to roughly 60 participants and 11 partnerships with local farmers.

Last month, Mather LifeWays Institute on Aging selected Lifeside Farms as one of two national winners of the 2015 Promising Practices Award for its unconventional health-care practices. Maarten Fischer, program manager of A Plus Health Care and creator of the program, said Lifeside Farms is unique because of its natural approach to promote mental and physical health.

"These people are usually so surrounded by health-care workers they start to not feel like a

normal person any more," Fischer said. "Farmers don't smell, look or sound like a caregiver, so a patient feels like a person again."

He said many of the organization's clients are homebound and face additional health issues tied to isolation, inactivity and lack of purpose.

At the farm, people are able to feed chickens, harvest vegetables, groom animals and socialize alongside farmers who have been trained as caregivers.

"For some people, the farm is a baby step toward finding employment and for some older people it's a place to form new relationships," Fischer said. "Others may have an ongoing struggle the farm can meet for



DOROTHY GRACE, left, of the Lifeside Farms Program, helps **Julie Robinson** skirt the fleece of a sheep at Round Prairie Farms in Whitefish. Grace has participated in the program for more than a year and has crocheted a sweater from the wool she has skirted. (Aric Bryan/Daily Inter Lake)

years to come." Fischer was raised with the idea that being outside is tied to health.

He moved from the Netherlands to Montana roughly four years ago and formed Lifeside Farms based on a European model, Green Care Farms, which he watched expand in his country.

Today, there are 1,500 care farms in the region, making it the biggest source of day programs within the Netherlands, he said.

Keith Anderson, a University of Montana associate professor with in the College of Health Professions, said he believes Lifeside Farms may be the first program in the United States based on the European model.

"There are multifunctional agriculture programs, but this system is different because it's coached within the health-care system," Anderson said. "Using the benefit of nature doesn't fit what most people would consider a very rigid health-care model in the United States."

He said while the Green Care Farm model is not often supported by medical services in the United States, patients would often rather be outside than in a health facility.

On a recent March morning, Laura Putnam dropped off her 23-year-old daughter, Cecilia, at Round Prairie farm in Whitefish.

Cecilia has cerebral palsy. She's often quiet

and slow to talk because she's worried people won't understand her, Putnam said.

"But then she was selected as one of the first participants of this program, and she wouldn't stop talking about it," Putnam said. "Every day, she talked about the farm and when she could come back. Every time she goes, it changes her entire week."

Cecilia joined the program to gain confidence. Now she works at an animal grooming and lodging shelter in Kalispell.

Diane Ward, owner of Round Prairie, hesitantly agreed to take on Cecilia three years ago as a part of the program's pilot program.

Now, she has six people visit her sheep farm once

a week.

"I slowly watched these animals pull out more aspects of her personality. I learned through my relationship with her how special this program is," Ward said.

As she talked, Cecilia and two other participants brushed away a horse's winter coat while another group of women watched farm dogs practice rounding up sheep.

"Whatever these ladies are facing, there's stuff they can do here," Ward said. "They've learned how to take care of sheep, horses, chickens and each other. We just work well as a group."

Reporter *Kathryn Houghton* may be reached at 758-4436 or by email at khoughton@dailyinterlake.com.

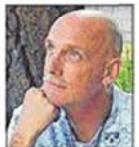
Veteran's family pays it forward

Daily Inter Lake

The family of an Evergreen Navy veteran plans to remember their loved one by donating his humble home — a 22-foot 1983 camper — to a person in need.

James Jellested, 57, died March 20 of organ failure, leaving four children and 11 grandchildren along with other local relatives. His niece, Danielle Teske, said her uncle lived a simple life, working for a local used car dealer.

He didn't have much, but his camper was his pride and joy. "The camper was given to him. It was his home. He just got it last winter and he was so excited and looking forward to fixing it up," she said. "The family decided we would return



JAMES JELLESTED