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Ralph Kettle of Waverly Honey Company talks to visitors about his products at Sunday's Honey Festival at the Loveland Farmer's Market. Kettle is also involved with Hives for Heroes, a nonprofit that offers therapeutic beekeeping services to first responders and veterans. (Jocelyn Rowley/Loveland Reporter-Herald).

Loveland Honey Festival spotlights the healing power of beekeeping

After he retired from a 42-year career with the Poudre Fire Authority, Ralph Kettle wasn't sure how he would fill his days. But then he discovered the restorative world of beekeeping and found not only a vocation that gave him purpose but also something that helped him deal with some painful memories from his firefighting past.

“There is research that shows beekeeping as being very helpful to PTSD issues,” said Kettle, who owns the Fort Collins-based Waverly Honey Company. “You start with one thought, and it just starts building on itself, and it becomes overwhelming, and you have to do something to break that thought process. And beekeeping, for me, does that.”

Now Kettle is helping other first responders and military veterans find the same peace through Hives for Heroes, a nonprofit that he said gives people “something to focus on that is bigger than themselves.”

“There’s so much to learn about beekeeping—the biology, keeping your bees healthy, the honey part of it as well,” Kettle said. “And it really is a way not only to help veterans and first responders focus on something else, but it also builds another core support for them.”

The beekeeper and his family were manning a booth at the 5th annual Honey Festival, an offshoot of the weekly Loveland Farmers Market. Hundreds of visitors buzzed around Fairgrounds Park on Sunday morning, lining up for samples of honey, mead and other treats. There were also educational booths, bee-related art and crafts and a “Busy Bee” play area for young festival goers.

As head of the Colorado chapter of Hives for Heroes, Kettle is actively recruiting beekeeping mentors to help introduce the pastime to new members. He said there is high demand statewide for the organization’s therapeutic services and he is eager to bring new members into the fold.

“We’ve got lots of veterans from Fort Carson and Colorado Springs, all the way through the Buckley Air Force Base, all the way to Cheyenne,” Kettle said.

His organization is also partnering with other Larimer County organizations that offer therapy services to first responders, a mission he hopes to expand.

In the meantime, however, Kettle is happy to spend as much time as possible with his family and with his friends among the hives.

“When I get out of bed in the morning, I’ve got something that is important for me to do,” he said.

For more information about Hives for Heroes, visit hivesforheroes.com.

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