

War Horses for Veterans: 'Your Anxiety Goes Away'

A program in Kansas teaches combat vets how to handle and care for horses

Sep 26, 2018

As he pulled up the gravel driveway to a 12-acre farm in Stilwell, Kan., Joseph Headrick realized just how far he was from home. It was here, in the heart of America and nearly 2,000 miles from his home in Puyallup, Wash., that he hoped to find salvation from his post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms.

Headrick, 34, a former Army tanker and a member of VFW's Department of Washington, served a 10-month deployment in Iraq from 2009 to 2010. For years, doctors prescribed him medication to treat his PTSD symptoms, but in Kansas he was looking for a different remedy.

"It's quiet," he said of the calming effect of the farm. "Everything is not going a million miles a minute around you."

Headrick is one of 152 veterans who came to Stilwell to participate in the War Horses for Veterans program. The nonprofit organization, founded in September 2014, aims to teach combat veterans about horsemanship while offering a mentoring program that helps them build possible career contacts.

Through a \$7,000 VFW Foundation Grant, War Horses for Veterans trains volunteers to participate in its Mentorship Leadership Development Program. Mentors oversee 15-20 participants.

They identify changes veterans hope to make and create an accountability plan to meet those goals. War Horses for Veterans co-founder Patrick Benson said in April that the program had seven volunteers training to become mentors.

RELIEF BEYOND A PILL

At the farm, owned by program co-founders Andy and Pat Brown, around five to six

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

406 W. 34th Street
Kansas City, MO 64111
Office 816.756.3390
Fax 816.968.1157

WASHINGTON OFFICE

200 Maryland Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002
Office 202.543.2239
Fax 202.543.6719

info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

veterans spend three days learning how to groom, saddle and ride horses with Benson and other volunteer veterans. The effect horses have on those who struggle with PTSD is astounding, Benson said.

“They can sense every bit of your emotions,” the 38-year-old VFW life member said. “It’s pretty remarkable. Once you build that connection and you click with them, it’s like nothing else. It’s like an endorphin release and then a rush of calming. Your anxiety goes away.”

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, PTSD is a condition that can develop when someone has experienced a shocking, scary or dangerous situation. Symptoms include flashbacks of the traumatic event, nightmares and difficulty sleeping. Sights and smells also can trigger the traumatic event.

According to VA, around 31 percent of Vietnam veterans, 20 percent of Iraq War veterans and 11 percent of Afghanistan War veterans have PTSD. The condition is generally treated with therapy and medication, but that hasn’t stopped veterans like Headrick from searching for relief beyond the kind that comes in the form of a pill.

Headrick, who had never ridden a horse before traveling to Stilwell, said he saw changes in himself on the first day of participating in the program.

“The first time I went to go into the pen with Wild Wind, he was going crazy,” Headrick said of his first experience on the Browns’ farm with one of the Paint horses, a registered breed bearing distinctive spots of color in their coats. “And I’m sitting there shaking. The next thing you know, I’m walking around the horse, then I’m up on him.”

Horses create a calming effect, he added.

“You are at the mercy of this creature and it’s humbling,” he said. “It literally stops you in your tracks and slows everything down because you have to focus with that horse.”

‘PAYBACK’ FOR MILITARY SERVICE

The focus Headrick described is not confined to the pen, Benson explained.

“You take that mentality and apply it to your personal life,” Benson said. “All of these traits transition over very well.”

Benson brainstormed the idea for War Horses for Veterans after he saw how equine therapy affected his own PTSD symptoms. After serving as an Army infantryman in Iraq in 2003, the Missouri native returned home from the war and entered the equestrian industry as a horse trainer.

“I realized what I was doing for a living was saving me,” he said. “I was fixing all these

horses, but all in all they had been fixing me.”

When friends he served with visited him in Missouri, he observed the same effects.

“They would get clarity after working with the horses,” Benson said. “They would say, ‘Man, I haven’t been this relaxed in so long.’”

Benson met the Browns in 2013 through equestrian connections and began training and selling Morgan horses (one of the earliest U.S. breeds and used extensively as cavalry horses in the Civil War) for them later that year. When Benson proposed the idea for the equestrian program, the Browns were immediately on board.

Andy Brown, a 45-year businessman in the pipe and valve industry, and his wife, Pat, a retired travel agency owner, fronted more than \$250,000 the first year to get the program started.

“It’s really important to us to make sure that our veterans are taken care of,” Pat said. “They have taken care of us. The guys who come through here are looking for help, and if we can provide that help with our horses and our programs, what better payback can there be?”

The Browns currently spend about \$250,000 the first year to sustain War Horses for Veterans. The program also is funded through private donations and local and national grant programs.

STAYING CONNECTED TO PARTICIPANTS

The weekend immersion and mentorship program is open to all combat veterans. To qualify, veterans can apply on the organization’s website www.warhorsesforveterans.com. Once accepted, the organization and local sponsors provide airline tickets, lodging and meals throughout the three-day workshop.

What makes their organization different, Pat explained, is the follow-up they provide after veterans leave.

Army and Iraq War veteran Derrick Boddy, for example, moved to Pleasanton, Kan., for a ranch job in 2017 after participating in the program. The San Diego native said he found War Horses for Veterans through friends.

“I like animals,” he said. “I know animals respond to humans. I wanted to learn how to ride a horse.”

Through the organization’s mentoring program, Boddy, who was living in Washington state at the time, was able to land the job in Kansas.

“They are still showing help just to touch base to see how I am doing,” Boddy said.

Since the program’s inception, seven vets, as of June had moved to Kansas City for work they found through the program.

The organization’s co-founders were not the only ones who had seen the positive effects of equine therapy. In Leonia, N.J., a team of researchers from Columbia University’s Irving Medical Center in New York are studying how equine therapy can help veterans with PTSD. The Man O’ War Project is a nonprofit founded and funded by Army veteran and horse enthusiast Earle Mack.

In the study, veterans meet once a week for two months and are guided through interactions with horses. Veterans never mount the horse during the study. Like the program in Stilwell, participants in New Jersey experienced similar changes after working with the horses.

“There is something about the experience of being around the horses,” said Prudence Fisher, co-director of the study.

She added that “people are looking forward to these sessions,” even when they are ill and should rest at home.

“But they come because they feel like they need to be around the horse,” Fisher said.

Once the study is complete, researchers plan to write and publish an equine therapy manual for other organizations and individuals to use in the future. The manual will give step-by-step instructions on how to perform the equine-assisted therapy, according to the researchers.

ENDOWMENT ENSURES FUTURE

Back on the farm in Kansas, however, there is no guidebook to the day-to-day affairs at the Brown estate. Instead, participants move at their own pace while connecting with fellow veterans.

During summer sessions, they can be found unwinding after a long day under the sun with a swim in the Browns’ pool while barbecuing and listening to music.

“It’s opened my eyes that it’s not only about me,” Headrick said. “It’s about us as a whole. It’s amazing.”

Veterans can return to the farm for future workshops as many times as they want. They also have the opportunity to become mentors to future program participants.

Gary Llewellyn, 71, a retired Army warrant officer and a member of VFW’s Department of

Missouri, participated in the program in 2015. He later moved to Kansas from Michigan to become a program mentor.

“I knew I wanted to be involved with this,” Llewellyn said. “That light is going to click on, that smile is going to come across their face, and they are going to have that freedom of not having that anxiety in their life.”

Earlier this year, the Browns constructed an 11,520-square-foot indoor arena and a 2,500-square-foot lounge to expand workshops into the fall and winter months.

They also rolled out their spouse program, where spouses of veterans can join them during a weekend workshop.

Andy and Pat Brown also recently created an endowment to sustain the operation and a trust in which all of their land would go to the War Horses organization.

“Our goal here is that this will continue to grow,” Andy said. “We have all that set in place now. Whether we do or don’t live long enough, there will be funds there to continue this whole thing on and on and on.”

For veterans like Headrick, the open-ended invitation is too much to resist.

“It created a calm, and it doesn’t want to leave, and that’s a good thing,” Headrick said. “And I will be going back as many times as they allow me to come back. I’m addicted.”

This article is featured in the September 2018 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by Traci Badalucco, a freelance writer for VFW magazine. Photo by Susan McSpadden.