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Serving Those Who Have Served

Equine therapy programs for veterans can be a catalyst for changing lives.

By Katie Navarra

Horses evoke deep emotional and physical responses in people, especially in individuals burdened by trauma or stress. Because of this innate quality, horses offer unique healing opportunities for veterans returning from service.

“Let me count the ways in which a

horse can benefit veterans,” said Mary Jo Beckman, U.S. Navy, Retired. As an instructor for active duty personnel who are removed from their units and sent to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, and as the instructor and co-founder of Equine Services for Heroes, Beckman has witnessed firsthand the wide range of support horses offer to veterans.

She has watched amputees at the Walter Reed Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland, learn how to “walk” through their hips, guided by the natural motion of a horse’s stride. One rider in particular, Nick, had his right leg amputated above the knee and was able to use his prosthesis after only riding two times. His body gravitated towards his left leg, but the movement of

the horse taught him to be even in his hips. Because of the horse's help, he was able to go from walking using the parallel bars to walking using two canes to walking with one cane all in a week.

For other veterans, she has seen how simply being around horses offers moments for emotional and cognitive healing that simply can't be achieved any other way. Some veterans like to talk with their horses and share issues that cannot be shared with humans. "The horses seem to listen," she said.

Horses force people to be fully present in the moment, and they don't judge their handlers; veterans find this a very powerful way to become calmer and stay relaxed and focused.

Beckman, as well as Meggan Hill-McQueeney, President/COO of BraveHearts Therapeutic Riding and Educational Center, and Kathy Blaine, program director at Loudoun Therapeutic Riding, offer the following considerations for implementing a successful program for veterans.

Understanding Veterans

Veterans have a wide variety of challenges, from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to traumatic brain injuries or other physical injuries. Some veterans simply have a goal of working toward reintegrating into their communities and civilian life.

"You have to know who a veteran is to best serve him or her," said Hill-McQueeney.

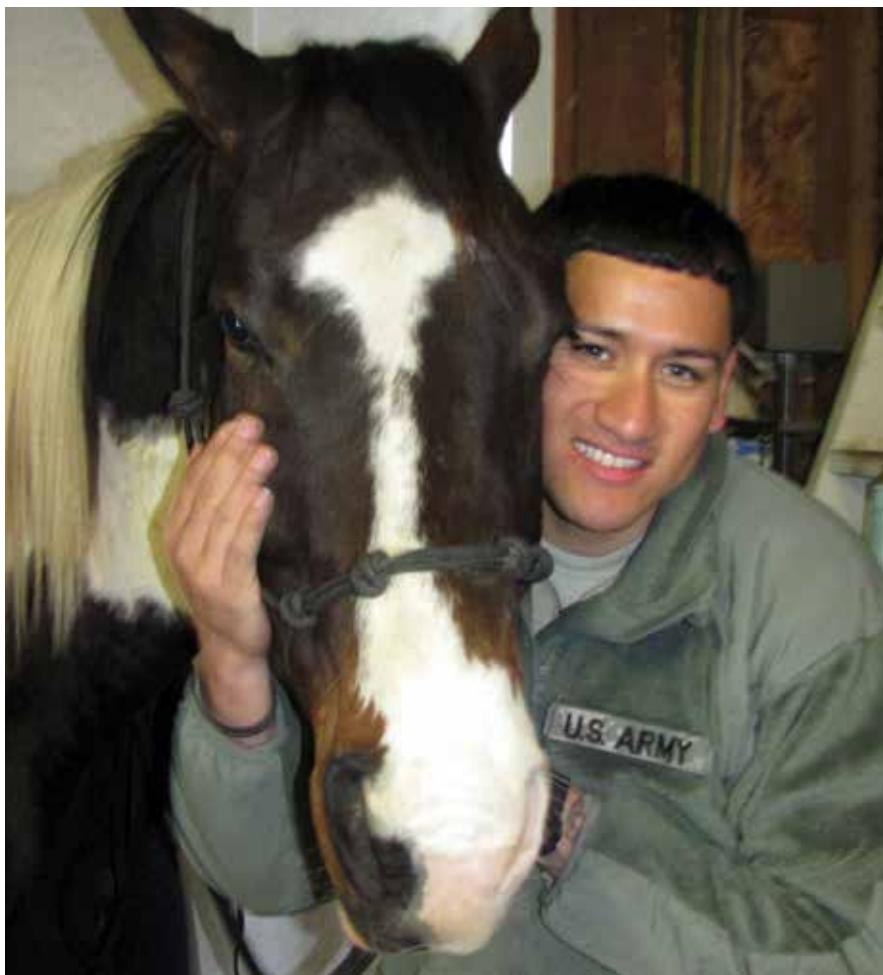
"Understanding the military culture is one of the biggest differences in serving veterans compared with offering other services," Blaine added.

Respecting a veteran's desire to be independent while keeping him or her safe is crucial. "Veterans are looking to be challenged in a meaningful way," Hill-McQueeney said.

At BraveHearts, veterans have a wide variety of activities from which to choose, depending on their goals. They even have opportunities to become volunteers or certified Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH) instructors.

"We offer an all-veteran drill team, because we find that they want to be part of a team—a unit. It's something they miss when coming back into society," she added.

It's important to work closely with each individual to understand his or her personal needs and goals to first and foremost



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"These men and women deserve the best possible services our industry has to offer. Doing that means having the right personnel and the right horses in a suitable environment," said Kathy Blaine.

build the foundation for a relationship. The specific challenges a veteran faces might affect the frequency with which he or she can attend sessions. Challenging personal schedules laden with doctor appointments and therapy sessions limit a veteran's availability to be with the horses. In some cases, the disabilities that a veteran has do not allow for good sleep, so if a lesson is scheduled for the morning, he or she might miss it.

Others suffer from brain injuries that impair their memories. Electronic calendars set with reminders are necessary to help them keep appointments. Transportation can limit access to the barn, especially for those who are unable to drive due to physical or cognitive issues. For some, a trip to the barn can be an agonizing social experience. For others, the barn offers safe environment and they arrive early for lessons and stay late afterward.

"We work hard to provide the flexibility required to make it work for the individual

seeking services," Blaine said.

Providing safe and private facilities allows the individual to feel comfortable, which allows that individual to develop trust with the horse and the facility staff. "A quiet, peaceful setting is most beneficial to promote relaxation and reduce hypervigilance," Blaine said.

Designating space specifically for veterans can also create a sense of community or belonging. "Years ago, a program decided to make a special place for veterans in the barn. They turned a storage area into a 'canteen' where people donated snacks and drinks, and it was a gathering place for veterans," Beckman said.

The Instructors

Training for those individuals working with veterans is imperative. "PATH International is a great wheelhouse for establishing standards and guidelines for instructors," Hill-McQueeney said.

Helping an individual through an

episode of PTSD requires skill and training. While working with a female Army officer with a diagnosis of PTSD, Beckman witnessed four episodes during interactions with the client. "I learned that I needed more education and more tools to use to help her. The client credited her horse with helping her through these episodes," Beckman said.

Three years ago, BraveHearts Therapeutic Riding and Educational Center partnered with PATH to design a curriculum tailored to helping instructors and facilities better understand and serve veterans.

"There wasn't any training for instructors specific to working with individuals suffering from PTSD, sexual trauma and several other topics, so we built this into the new course that was released in 2015," Beckman said.

It was first held as an onsite workshop certification (OSWC) in 2015, then transferred to an online course.

"I recently talked with an instructor who told me how much education she received from this online course, and it helped her better understand the veterans that come to our center," Beckman said.

Sensitivity training is as essential as technical training for working with individuals with special needs. Beckman heard a story several years ago that at an undisclosed therapeutic program, a volunteer asked a veteran that had been in Iraq or Afghanistan if he had killed anyone. "Oh, my goodness; imagine how awful that was for the veteran," Beckman said.

"You have one chance to get it right with veterans," Hill-McQueeney said. "It's really important that the instructors and the facilities are welcoming and demonstrate honest, good intentions."

Blaine recommended seeking out people experienced in serving veterans. Ask that person questions and spend a good bit of time learning about the person and observing his or her behaviors prior to even considering allowing that person to serve veterans. "These men and women deserve the best possible services our industry has to offer. Doing that means having the right personnel and the right horses in a suitable environment," she said.

The Horses

Horses have an innate ability to sense an individual's needs, but some horses are better at connecting with people than

others, so temperament is an important consideration.

"Sometimes we let the horse choose his/her person," Blaine said. "We'll allow the veteran to meet several horses and let it happen naturally. We have a few horses that are super sensitive to what their person needs right in the moment, and it's incredible to watch."

Pairing the right horse with the right veteran sometimes depends on the size of both the horse and the person. All veterans are adults, which means larger horses, bigger equipment and larger volunteers. Draft crosses make good candidates, especially ones that are not too large, yet are sturdy. Some veterans who suffer from depression and/or PTSD or other issues might gain weight, which can make fitting them to a horse more difficult.

"Many of the active duty members can be heavy, ranging from 200 to 250 pounds. This has presented challenges in finding the right horses. Some of these participants are very muscle-oriented, but others are not," Beckman said.

A smaller horse can be used if doing unmounted ground work. Or there might be a progression of horses to help the veteran make adjustments. It all depends on the individual.

Take-Home Message

Horses can be a catalyst for great change in people, but it takes great people who love and care deeply about both the horses and the people to make it work.

"The changes we staff and instructors see in veterans are profound. Watching someone blossom and grow after years of struggle is humbling and inspiring," Blaine said.

Veterans add a new element to any stable, because they have a different view of the world, different skill sets and a different mentality. The Loudoun Therapeutic Riding staff members often comment that they take away more than they bring to the relationship. "Being part of a community of people who are so dedicated to serving others is a privilege for me, personally," Blaine said.

The veterans who participate in these programs summarize their benefits the best. During a lesson, Beckman overheard a veteran say to her horse: "My trust in you has become a bridge to the world." **SM**