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and Military Families to Provide Support and Comfort



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By DONNA BOYLE SCHWARTZ

Americans' love affair with horses is embedded deep in our collective psyche and history, from images of cowboy great Roy Rogers and his beloved Trigger to the heroic service of the brave Marine Corps warhorse Sergeant Reckless during the Korean War. One non-profit organization, The Equus Effect, is transforming this time-honored partnership into a powerful tool for healing and rehabilitation for veterans and military families who may need assistance reintegrating into civilian society.

"Our initial idea for The Equus Effect came

about in 2008 when Jane Strong and David Sonatore saw the statistic of 22 suicides a day among military veterans," relates Kelly Hitt, communications director and outreach coordinator for the Connecticut-based organization. "They were appalled and saddened by this and had an intuition that the horses could help with folks who were not getting what they needed from traditional therapy."

Strong continues to be active in the organization, serving as its executive director and lead facilitator. Co-founder Sonatore is a licensed clinical social worker and certified life coach, serving as

Equus Effect participants learn how to re-integrate into civilian life through spending time with the horses in the program.

program director and lead facilitator. Both Strong and Sonatore trained with Buck Brannaman, a world-class horse trainer whose precise techniques evoke both trust and collaboration from horses.

"Our aim and our mission is to provide veterans with essential tools to build their capacity for healthy, authentic relationships at home, work and school," she continues. "We believe that since veterans have signed a blank check to Uncle Sam, they deserve to enjoy the freedoms they were willing to give their lives to protect. So many come home in body but not in mind, heart or spirit. The Equus Effect Program offers them a bridge back to relationships among those with whom they live and work. We know they want to get on with their lives and this work offers them some ways to challenge themselves and get a 'leg up.'"

Since 2012, The Equus Effect has served more than 2,000 men and women in uniform as well as those who support them. "We also serve Blue and Gold Star families as well as first responders," Hitt notes. "We give them tools to handle their roles at home and work as well as the difficult job of supporting their sons and daughters. The work helps settle their nervous systems so they can face the challenges that are both unique and universal for those who have come from high stress environments."





The therapy program is based on four core principles: resonance, connection, collaboration, and capacity, which are integrated into a form of therapy called somatic experiencing. This is a body-centered approach that has been shown to help people suffering from symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as anxiety and depression. Somatic experiencing focuses on physical responses that occur when someone experiences trauma. Therapy sessions take place once a week for four hours, for four weeks.

"These principles are designed to build competence, confidence, and the ability to handle life on life's terms away from the horses," Hitt explains. "As prey animals, horses are incredible teachers who are sensitive to our intentions and do not ever pretend to feel safe. When we use finesse versus force — and invite them to collaborate with us rather than control them — they teach us how to be in trust-based relationships with each other. We use experiential learning with the horses, a didactic presentation called emotional agility and resilience practices derived from somatic experiencing to help veterans rebuild their capacity for healthy relationships.

"One of the most significant challenges facing military personnel and their families is the discon-

nection they feel between them and civilians," she continues. "Whether or not someone is diagnosed with PTSD, the transition from military to civilian life is enormous. Fewer and fewer people understand the challenges soldiers face in war because of the all-volunteer military and almost no one can relate to the combination of vigilance, regret, depression, and anxiety that so many folks who return from the service face as they try to find meaning, purpose and healthy engagement with others in the civilian culture.

"Our way of dealing with this is to teach veterans and others how horses see the world — which is very similar to them — and how horses navigate the shift from fight, flight, freeze responses to homeostasis with ease," Hitt adds. Learning to work with them effectively addresses these issues in the veterans through real horsemanship skills because they need to regulate their own nervous systems to be effective with the horses. The result is that they are then able to do this for themselves at home and in their communities. Nearly everyone says that their relationships at home and in their communities are far better having learned how to work with the horses effectively by reading non-verbal cues, recognizing their own triggers and building the capacity to handle situa-



tions in their lives more effectively.”

The Equus Effect program is free to participants and is funded primarily through donations from individuals and family foundations. “We also have the support of larger funders who support services for veterans and who are interested in our type of approach to dealing with the stress of transition from a uniformed life to a life among civilians,” Hitt comments.

Clients are typically referred to The Equus Effect by the Veterans Administration or local therapists. “We are transparent about our aims and never treat anyone as if they are broken,” Hitt points out. “We respect the transition from war to peace at home or abroad and are dedicated to

empowering veterans with tools they can understand and use when they return home.

“We use real horsemanship skills – not games – to teach people how to handle themselves, recognize triggers and become better communicators with family, friends, and co-workers,” she adds. “We hear firsthand that first-responders make better decisions and get less burned out on the job. We know that Blue and Gold Star families leave our program with tools to acknowledge and handle their emotions. We accomplish our mission with compassion, profound and practical tools for renewal and resilience, and treat our participants and our horses with dignity and respect.”

