



# THE AMERICAN LEGION DEPARTMENT OF IDAHO



## Equine Therapy Helps Veterans Readjust to Civilian Life

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Operation Horses and Heroes is a four-year-old grassroots organization that uses equine therapy to help veterans with post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injury and other issues which harm a veteran's ability to reintegrate into civilian life. Started by veteran and Legionnaire Jerry Paulsen of Illinois, the program has an all-volunteer staff that includes Jinny Cash.

Cash serves as an equine assisted coach, but she's also the vice commander for The American Legion Department of Idaho, and a veteran of Operation Enduring Freedom with service in Afghanistan.

This past weekend Horses and Heroes ran a program for seven veterans out of the Kentucky Equine Humane Center in Lexington, Ky.

“Operation Horses and Heroes is based out of the Chicago area and we do events like this where we bring in different veterans that may have issues with PTSD or just a little bit of trouble adjusting to civilian life and we use horses to help them work through some of those problems that they are having”, explained Cash. “Horses don't lie. Horses know your feelings and they are very intuitive. If you walk out into a corral or pen with horses, they know if you are in a bad



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mood, they know if you are in a good mood. They know if you need sympathy, they know if you need to be left alone, and they give you what you need.”

“We’re using the power of the horse to help them because what we do is ground therapy, so there is no riding involved whatsoever, all the work is done on the ground and they’re using the horses to help them deal with, identify what each one is dealing with,” Paulsen said. “The horse is actually the vehicle that is affecting the change to help them overcome, deal with, identify and process, and now bring it to the surface, and by using the horse and the camaraderie and fellowship of our fellow brothers and sisters in arms they are able to start to cope with it, deal with it, and work through it to help them.”

Operation Heroes and Horses has extended to eight states, running from Idaho to Georgia, and treats all veterans, irrespective of the type of discharge the veteran might have.

Among those attending this session were Michael Vargo and his father, John Lopez, both of the Indianapolis area. Vargo was a combat engineer and heavy equipment operator, while his father

had served in the Marine Corps before a 20-year break in service. During Operation Enduring Freedom, Lopez enlisted in the National Guard, where he became a combat medic and found himself deployed to Ramadi.

“We weren’t actually planning on coming here, we didn’t know anything about it,” said Vargo. “A good friend of mine had called me up and basically told me I was coming. I didn’t really know anything about it but I knew it was a veteran program, and the first person I thought of was my dad. I thought it would be a good place for both of us to be.

“We both have our struggles right now, and I know how much at times he’s struggling. He’s my father so he feels like he’s got to be my father and so he tries to hide it sometimes, but I see that. So, I figured this would be my way of letting him know it doesn’t always have to be that way.”

And Lopez didn’t need much convincing in order to attend.

“We needed this,” said Lopez, standing next to his son. “I know I needed it for myself, internally, but I kind of thought it would benefit him and I together. A verbal connection, talks we haven’t had for a while, or that we never had, we needed that.”

Communication is a major focus of the weekend program. Along with Paulsen and Cash, other volunteers include Dr. Michael-Renee Godfrey, a licensed professional counselor from Marietta, Ga., who herself served 16 years in the Air Force reserve, and Father Andrew Johnson, an Anglican priest from Oconomowoc, Wis.



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Short exercises with the horses are interspersed with periods of reflection afterward, both in groups and alone. Program participants are encouraged to air out what their fears and hopes are, with many of them finding common ground with others present.

But for most, it was the horses themselves that were the real heroes of the event.

“Those big beasts have an innate ability to know how you are feeling. If you are nervous, it’s going to know it, if you’re sad, it’s going to know it,” said Paulsen. “Unlike a dog, they are not lap animals, but by working with them you are developing confidence, you’re developing that rapport, and they sense that. And as a horse person myself, knowing how that has helped me personally, and then seeing how it is affecting all of these other fellow veterans, it is an amazing transformation.”

“When we first bring the veterans on board, we meet the horses one on one, and the veterans get to interact with the horse,” explained Cash. “It might just be brushing or petting or talking to the horse. They might put their arms around the horse’s neck and just feel that heartbeat, but it’s a peace...they get a peace from those horses, and then they start using the horses as a problem to be solved, or to build a team, or to reflect, and in every one of the little exercises we do the horses serve a different purpose.”

Carol Tonne of Paducah, Ky., attended with her husband, and found a common thread with the horses, which were all rescued from injury or malnutrition.

“They are broken, but they are beautiful. And we’re broken but we’re beautiful,” Tonne said.

Vargo echoed Tonne’s comments. “Here we are at a humane society for horses, and these animals come from all walks of life, just like a veteran does. They’ve all had their own struggles. And it’s soothing to see an animal as beautiful and strong as a horse and you can see the pain in them, you can feel their struggle in a way. And for me it felt like there was a connection, a spiritual connection if you will.”

For Wilmore Brown Jr., a former radar operator who lives in Lexington and volunteers at the local VA, it was a chance to get out and be around others, something he struggles with because of mobility issues.

“I didn’t know what to expect, I thought maybe we might ride the horses, but I knew I would be around veterans and that’s really the reason why I’m here. If this had been an open forum I probably wouldn’t feel this safe. I’m not the only one with my problems, and there is help out here.”



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Tonne and her husband, Don, both felt the program was very rewarding and looked forward to putting into practice what they had learned with their two rescue horses at home. “It’s a phenomenal resource for interacting with another being while you are experiencing your emotions. And they kind of talk to you in some ways and show you things that you aren’t seeing. The horses show you what you need to know.”

And for Paulsen, taking what you learned from the program and moving on is exactly why he founded the program.

“We’ve had individuals come through and they’ve been wanting to commit suicide, but after the program they’ll come up to me and my staff, our cadre, and say ‘because of this all I want to do is live, can you help me?’ And they thank me, but I’m not the person, the stars of the show all have four legs. We all have battle buddies when we are on active duty, and we’re out in the sandbox or wherever we’re deployed, but these horses become their battle buddy, and they have that bond that they take with them well after the program.”

Check out this [video](#) of the program in action and you can always reach out to Operation Horses and Heroes by contacting them at [info@operationhorsesandheroes.org](mailto:info@operationhorsesandheroes.org).

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The American Legion was chartered and incorporated by Congress in 1919 as a patriotic veterans organization devoted to mutual helpfulness.