

Helping veterans overcome challenges

Madison County site on leading edge of horse therapy

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Think of a therapy visit and the image of a chat on a couch with a bespectacled professional may be among the first that comes to mind. That a horse would somehow be involved with a treatment session seems more like sitcom plot than an actual medical reality. And though there's no telling how "Mr. Ed" meets "Frasier" would fare as a TV show, horses as part of psychotherapy is an increasingly popular treatment for everyone from kids to couples and families to veterans.

Horse Sense of the Carolinas in Madison County is on the leading edge of this innovative approach, called Equine Assisted Psychotherapy and Equine Assisted Learning (EAP/EAL). The beautiful site located on 110 acres along Meadows Town Road offers a retreat for both horses and humans. "If it is not good for both of us, it isn't good for either of us," Shannon Knapp says, who runs Horse Sense with her husband Robert. "This approach helps to see things from another's point of view."

"Starting" horses

Before arriving to their new home, the 27 horses now roaming the rolling pastureland had been traditionally handled, serving only the needs of their owners. "That's good for us and not for them," Shannon explains. "We are working on 'starting' horses. Not 'breaking' them."

18 are now ready to help serve clients, including Sergeant Gus, retired from service with the Asheville Police Department. The chestnut Quarter Horse's partner with the police force selected Horse Sense as the ideal place for its retirement. The quality environment created for horses provides a platform to service the two-legged visitors to the ranch. "The principles of creating relationships with horses apply when creating relationships with people," Shannon says.

That philosophy has informed Horse Sense since 2003 in their work helping individuals manage anxiety, depression and other mental and behavioral challenges. The horse's sensitivity means the animal reacts and responds differently based on person's emotional state. "You need to be here," describes Shannon. "Putting someone in the presence of a horse puts your brain in a place where we can do therapy." A licensed therapist works in tandem with a the horse and horse professional to address treatment goals.

Serving veterans

EAP/EAL therapy is growing in acceptance and practice. Various research studies have found that equine therapy can help reduce stress, eases symptoms of dementia and assist in reducing violence among patients. Some private insurance programs cover aspects of treatment.

Helping provide the unique therapy to populations in need has always been a goal for Horse Sense. For more than 10 years, the ranch has supplied programming to at-risk youth, including juvenile gang members. This work helped establish strategies addressing issues of addiction, trauma, depression and anxiety.

In 2012, Horse Sense created a non-profit arm called Heart of Horse Sense to raise funds to help pay for the programming. In addition to at-risk youth, Heart of Horse Sense identified the benefits EAP/EAL offers veterans and their families. Serving the needs of the region's military members became a priority. "There are also tons of Vietnam veterans in the area," states Knapp. "We don't discriminate on discharge status or when they served."

The benefits of horse therapy to veterans has been tracked in research studies. According to results from a pilot completed at Fort Carson, CO, equine therapy reduced the risk of violence by veterans by 24% and the risk of suicide by 62%.

A five-day retreat in October highlights how time at Horse Sense can benefit veterans impacted by post-traumatic stress disorder, chronic pain, anxiety and depression -- what Shannon calls "signature post 9/11 challenges." Horse professionals and licensed therapists helped lead activities including a scavenger hunt for horses and a partnership exercise that paired veterans together as they guided horses through simple tasks. "Something in the horse brings up something in the individual," Shannon observes.

Tim Stevenson of Leicester served in the Navy for two years from 1989-1991, during the time of the first Gulf War. While in the service, Stevenson suffered



Gulf War veterans Casi Brown and Tim Stevenson work together to bridle a horse.

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Marine Corps veteran and Peer Support Specialist Jake LaRue approaches a horse.

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a traumatic experience that he didn't want to think about for 15 years. "It would take me everywhere I didn't want to go," he explained. He acknowledges that his PTSD led to challenges communicating with his family, friends and loved ones, negatively impacting his relationships.

Not used to being around horses, he offered how just being alongside the powerful animals while at Horse Sense led to a breakthrough. "I know I have a hard time with communication. It's been a positive experience these past couple days. Really awesome."

According to Stevenson, a simple exercise that called for him to establish a connection with a horse, "led to a real breakthrough. I realize creating and keeping a relationship is a give and take. I can't be quiet all the time and shy. I need to put forth effort and get over making first contact," he recognized. "I had to do that with my horse. I had to put my hand out. Learning how to communicate with the horse opened a new door to use outside here."

Stevenson cherished his time at Horse Sense. "It is nice to get a break from reality, from the reality of my own problems." He also expressed gratitude to Heart of Horse Sense for helping fund his therapy. "It is the only way I'd be able to do it," he shared.

Casi Brown had always been around horses during her childhood in Alabama. After serving in the Marines during the first Gulf War, she never thought animals she was so familiar with would teach her such valuable lessons. As five



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Horse Sense of the Carolinas offers Equine Assisted Therapy on 110 acres along Meadows Town Road.

horses wandered about a large area inside a barn, Brown worked with Stevenson to apply a bridle atop a horse's head. The lesson required the vets to figure out how to work with each other and how to work with the horses. "We're not at the top of the food chain," she observed. "Their partnership is stronger than our partnership. We've got to consider who we're working with. We're not always at the top of the food chain."

Horse Sense offers "Fall in Fridays," opening its doors to veterans at the end of select weeks for a morning of programming. "We're honored and grateful to love the land and horses and to service veterans," says Shannon.

She also expressed gratitude to the local community for their support. "Madison County understood, they got it before Asheville did." The Knapps have invested roughly a half-million dollars into the site, with Shannon adding that it serves as a legacy to her late father. "This wouldn't have been possible without him."

Heart of Horse Sense will hold a fundraiser on Monday, Nov. 9 from 6:00-7:30 p.m. at the WNC Agriculture Center. The event supports equine therapy and will feature a screening of "Riding My Way Back: A Story About a Veteran, a Horse, and Hope".