



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

# VAanguard

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*Women Veterans Care*  
*Wounded Warrior Regiment*  
*Horses for Heroes*  
*Living Well With SCI*

## VA Southern Oregon Rehabilitation Center & Clinics

Craig Coggins, 39, and Loren Carrell, 25, are once again clad in helmets and ready for action. This time, though, there's no gunfire, blistering heat, or battle plan. These days, Coggins and Carrell sit high in the saddle, participants in Horses for Heroes, a program initiated in 2007 by the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association, or NARHA.

The concept is for existing NARHA centers to extend their services to wounded service members and veterans. For 40 years, NARHA centers have been working with individuals with disabilities so they can experience the physical, cognitive and emotional benefits of equine-assisted activities such as riding, driving and grooming, and therapies using the horse in a treatment strategy.

Coggins, a former Marine wound-

recovering from their combat experiences by building trust and relationships with the animals and with each other.

Carrell thinks of working with horses as a path back to his former life. "You get on a horse, you get a piece of normality," he explained while sitting on a bale of hay, speaking slowly, his words slightly slurred. "You aren't limping and people aren't looking at you. You feel normal. You feel good."

Carrell also suffered from short-term memory problems. At the first session, he said, "I'll forget what I did by the time I get to the car." By the fourth session, he had the confidence to perform the multi-step grooming sequence.

Coggins originally registered a 7 out of 10 on a pain scale. He reported that his pain level decreased to a 3 for up to 45 minutes after attending ther-

VAMC. "It builds their muscles as well as their memories."

## Sheridan (Wyo.) VA Medical Center

Retired Air Force Capt. Kelly Schaffer eases from his wheelchair to the back of his equine partner, Spot, under the supervision of NARHA instructor Kelly McElwee and volunteers from the Sheridan VA Medical Center. "That's right, Spots," he says. "You and I are a good team, aren't we?"

Once he is released from the electric lift that transfers him from chair to saddle, Schaffer confidently commands, "Walk on, Spots!" His indefatigable sense of humor compels Schaffer to remind his team daily that as an upstanding Appaloosa, Spot has many spots, not just one.

The five men and one woman participating in group treatment for

# High in the Saddle

**VA medical centers nationwide are partnering with private local riding centers to offer therapeutic riding programs to wounded veterans.**

ed in Iraq while serving in the Oregon Army National Guard, and Carrell, a soldier also wounded in Iraq, from the VA Southern Oregon Rehabilitation Center & Clinics in White City, were ideal candidates for the program. Coggins had back, hip and thigh injuries, post-traumatic stress disorder and moderate traumatic brain injury; Carrell had back, shoulder and lower leg injuries, PTSD and moderate brain injury.

For six weeks, Coggins and Carrell rode horses at Stable Hands, in nearby Yreka, Calif. They strengthened their bodies, memory and problem-solving skills while emotionally

apy sessions. "The only time I didn't feel pain was when I was riding in the saddle," said Coggins.

Stable Hands co-founder Marcia Cushman said the pain management was possible because of pressure-relieving posture while sitting on the horse. Another reason both veterans felt relief was that riding gave their brains a break from the pain because horseback riding requires a significant amount of focus.

"It's about being in the moment rather than focusing on the pain," said Chris Petrone, Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom program manager at the White City

PTSD with Sheridan VAMC psychologists Dr. Rusty Reynolds and Dr. Kurt Benson arrive every Friday morning to begin group session activities at Children, Horses and Adults in Partnership, or CHAPS, Equine-Assisted Therapy program. At first wary of the horses and the intricacies of grooming, tacking up and riding, they show remarkable progress in self-esteem and relaxation as the eight-week program progresses.

"Their therapeutic riding sessions are based on our volunteer classes, teaching horsemanship skills designed to keep the rider safe," notes instructor and executive director Sue Sud-

dith. “They are learning to rely on each other to help care for the horse and keep them safe while they ride, just like our ‘regular’ clients rely on volunteers to help them when they are first starting out.”

Daunting tasks such as picking out the horse’s feet or learning how to saddle and bridle produce less anxiety as the sessions go on, and by the final class, each veteran is confidently

or illness, and slowly losing control of your body,” says Jackie Van Mark, Sheridan VAMC public affairs officer. “Now, picture yourself on a horse. Twice a week, you get to ride, lifting you up from your wheelchair and away from suffering and depression. It sounds unbelievable, but it isn’t—horses can help!”

The PTSD treatment group started as a pilot program in late summer

2009. Adding the horses to the treatment program was a leap of faith for the VA staff, but according to Reynolds, it turned out to be an important part of the therapy.

“From a clinical view, the CHAPS program met and exceeded expectations,” he says. “All of the participants’ symptoms were reduced as a result of the program, but what was also evident was the accelerated rate at which this occurred. My colleague Dr. Benson and I were more than satisfied. I must also mention that the program’s equine therapists had as much to do with the results as the program itself; they were professional and demonstrated genuine positive regard for the veterans.”

#### Tucson (Ariz.) VA Medical Center

In April 2006, Therapeutic Riding of Tucson, or TROT, was contacted by the Tucson VA Medical Center with a request for a therapeutic riding program for disabled veterans. In September, the medical center funded six participants for a pilot program. The participants’ ages have ranged from 22 to 80 and they have had physical, emotional and cognitive challenges. The program was featured in the June



COURTESY BRAVEHEARTS THERAPEUTIC RIDING AND EDUCATIONAL CENTER

*Above: A paralyzed veteran student crosses a creek during a trail ride with BraveHearts Therapeutic Riding and Educational Center; right: Stable Hands co-founder Marcia Cushman leads Craig Coggins through warm-up exercises.*

handling responsibilities and helping others, building the foundation for teamwork and social skills.

For Schaffer, the therapeutic riding sessions started as an opportunity to have some recreation and leisure time away from the Sheridan VAMC, where he lives in the assisted living facility, Mountain View. But as time went on, the staff noticed distinct changes in his ambulation and motor skills, and he began coming to ride twice a week to help improve his gait.

“Imagine not being able to control your arms or legs due to an injury



COURTESY CHRIS PETRONE

2008 *American Legion Magazine* article, "Saddle Up."

Claudia Carreon suffered a traumatic brain injury in Iraq in June 2003, but she does not remember the accident or other significant events, such as the birth of her daughter. Her memory constantly erases itself. Pictures of family members are kept on the refrigerator to help her remember.

While she cannot express what it is like to ride a horse, her body remembers the process of mounting and riding. The cues and commands she gives to Thunder, her horse, to guide him through the skills course come naturally.

"It's a wonderful experience,"

Carreon says. "It's a feeling of being in charge of myself, of being in charge of the horse, the release of tension and stress, a feeling of peace and freedom I can't get anywhere else. It doesn't matter how many problems you have, you forget about them."

Navy veteran Rene Suarez, a Desert Shield veteran with debilitating rheumatoid arthritis, says the riding improves his flexibility and stability. When he started at TROT, he was walking with a cane. Because of the movement of the horse at the walk, which is a rhythmical motion very similar to a human walking gait, Suarez has put his cane aside.

Mandy Perigo, certified therapeutic recreation specialist, says the riding class creates a social network for the veterans. "I've seen the patients exchange phone numbers and they call each other." Being in the program has created a positive environment that affects other parts of the veterans' lives.

### **BraveHearts Therapeutic Riding and Educational Center, Illinois**

Supported by a grant from the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, BraveHearts Therapeutic Riding and Educational Center, located near Chicago, began accepting riders into its Horses for Heroes program in July 2007. Those first riders came from the Edward Hines Jr. VA Hospital.

The program quickly expanded to include veterans from the Milwaukee, North Chicago and Jesse Brown VA medical centers. In addition, referrals to the program are accepted from the Madison (Wis.) VA Medical Center as well as the Rockford (Ill.) VA Primary Care Clinic.



*At BraveHearts Therapeutic Riding and Educational Center near Chicago, therapeutic carriage driving is one of the activities offered to veterans.*

Veterans are also accepted on a self-referral basis, provided they are eligible for VA benefits. Most recently, patients from the Central Blind Rehabilitation Center at the Hines VA have begun riding at BraveHearts. Participants span conflicts from World War II to the current conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In the early stages of the program, veterans participated in therapeutic horseback riding as well as therapeutic carriage driving. Those activities are still key components of the program.

However, to expand and enhance the equine therapies available to veterans, BraveHearts was able to recruit to its full-time staff noted Western horseman Tom Chambers, whose recruitment was made possible by a grant from The Baxter International Foundation. After joining the staff in May 2009, Chambers immediately began developing a veterans mounted drill team. In addition, he has been teaching veterans about the bond that can be created between horse and human through ground work in a round pen ("horse whispering").

The hospital-based therapists who work with veterans participating in BraveHearts report stunning improvements, particularly in patients with PTSD and traumatic brain injury, confirming the positive reviews from the patients themselves.

### **Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center, Houston**

The NARHA Horses for Heroes program was launched a year ago at SIRE, Houston's Therapeutic Equestrian Centers' Fort Bend site in Missouri City, Texas. Two nurses from the De-

Bakey VA Medical Center—Glennys Asselin and Rebecca Niri—had signed up to volunteer at SIRE. Discussions with Asselin about the potential for referring their clients to SIRE inspired a project that has resulted in a case study presented at several nurses' conferences in Texas, Ohio and other parts of the country. The study now awaits publication.

The initial study focused on the first veteran to ride with SIRE, Derrick Perkins, who sustained a spinal cord injury. The Air Force veteran's

## Living the Dream

Sometimes there are moments that create unfathomable results in the life that we get to live today. For the last four years and six months, I felt as though I had been through the gamut of opportunities provided by modern medicine. That is, until I had the chance to get out of the box.

My entire life I have wanted to learn how to take care of horses and then have the experience of being able to ride them. After returning from Iraq, I did not believe that this dream, as well as many others, would ever be accomplished. But all that changed in May 2009—from that point my life, my thoughts, the feelings I had concerning myself, and what I could and could not do with my body physically, began to change.

One day while I was at the VA Southern Oregon Rehabilitation Center & Clinics in White City, I came across a flyer asking for two veteran volunteers with traumatic brain injury and PTSD to participate in a program called Horses for Heroes, being taught by a group of people who not only cared about regular citizens, now they were reaching out to help wounded veterans. They were from an organization called Stable Hands, operating out of Yreka, Calif.

On June 17, 2009, I drove down to Yreka to meet these amazing people. Then I was introduced to a horse named Keeper, who has done more for me than anyone who practices medicine.

Cathy and Marcia took the time week after week to teach me how to care for an animal from the ground up, as well as teaching me how to ride Keeper and not fall off. John, Dave and Pat walked by my side week after week to ensure that I would not hit the ground, and this gave me the self-esteem to be able to trust that Keeper would take care of me.

While working with Keeper, I began to feel as though I was changing inside. I felt better about myself overall and it gave me a new perspective on my medical issues. Today, I



*Craig Coggins sits astride Keeper, with the staff of Stable Hands standing by his side.*

am a veteran and mostly a person who is not sick, but a man who is overcoming the issues that I choose to work with and work through.

The staff of Stable Hands has told me about the changes they have been able to see in me from our time together between June and November of 2009. I have been able to see some of the changes, but most of all, it has been the change in perspective that I have noticed. Right now we are on a winter break and I am taking this time to address some of the issues that need attention.

I could not have become the person I am today without the help of Stable Hands and the wonderful people who have formed Horses for Heroes to help veterans like myself. I can now see that a new and different life can be lived, and that some of the dreams I had before Iraq, which I thought were unachievable due to my injuries, can be accomplished with the help of others.

- Craig Coggins

improvement in balance, strength and function over the last year and his impressive progress in riding skills have inspired others to take part.

In the summer of 2009, Steven Schulz joined Perkins' class. Schulz had been severely injured when a mine exploded under his truck in Iraq. His brain injury resulted in limited sensation and use of his left arm and leg as well as impaired speech and judgment. Relearning center and balance with this "new" body and different levels of sensation has become the focus for Schulz.

On the horse, he has no limitations in mobility. The horse doesn't care that he mounts from a ramp or that he uses just one hand to guide him.

With the assistance of volunteers, Schulz is learning to take control of and use his body to give the horse cues for direction and pace. In doing so, he is using every muscle, every joint, and all of his mental capacity to be effective.

It's too early to predict how far Schulz can go as a rider, but his motivation to succeed and his naturally

competitive spirit are likely to carry him further than his diagnosis would suggest. All of his achievements on the horse translate into improved function in his skills of daily living.

For more information about NARHA Horses for Heroes, visit [www.narha.org](http://www.narha.org), or contact Mary Jo Beckman, retired Navy commander and NARHA certified riding and driving instructor, at [mjbeckman@gmail.com](mailto:mjbeckman@gmail.com). Larry Long, director of Recreation Therapy Service in VA headquarters, is the coordinator for the Department. 