

PAAs Create

BY RANDY DOTINGA

a Healing

Horse Rhythm Foundation

PHOTOS BY FRED GREAVES

Brandon Rumbaugh figured horse therapy would be easy. Or as easy as anything would be for an Iraq veteran who lost both his legs when he stepped on a bomb.

“You go in, you hang out with the horse and you feel a little better about yourself, and you go on your way,” predicted the 23-year-old Rumbaugh, who has little patience for the touchy-feely. He figured the visit to a ranch would be a waste of time.

Then he went to a ranch outside Phoenix and met a light-brown horse named Major.

The horse, which had been both neglected and intensely worked in the past by a previous owner, was nervous around people. “When they put me in the pen with him, they didn’t know how he would act,” Rumbaugh says, and his wheelchair could have made the horse even more skittish. “The first couple days were kind of hard.”

Then something amazing happened. The fragile horse and the fragile amputee began to get along and even develop a bond.

Now, Rumbaugh—a “plain and simple” guy who doesn’t like to sit around and complain—is feeling calmer and surer of himself. Credit’s due not only to the four-legged Major but also to a pair of physician assistants, both military veterans, who are using equine power to turn around the lives of people damaged by the violence, trauma and terror of combat.

Sahika Riley, MPAS, PA-C, and a former PA educator, founded Horse Rhythm Foundation (Horse Rhythm), in 2011 to help military veterans overcome both mental health disorders and physical disability inflicted



OPPOSITE: PA Sahika Riley, founded Horse Rhythm Foundation to help veterans, first responders and their families

THIS PAGE: Veteran Brandon Rumbaugh with Major, one of Horse Rhythm Foundaton's "equine therapists."

Bond

by combat. The foundation offers highly specialized equine-assisted services (EAS), outdoor therapies, and wellness for veterans, first responders and their families. Numerous studies show these modalities help in learning coping skills and self-intervention healing, allowing for transition back into society.

Carmen Meridith, DHSc, MS, PA-C, Horse Rhythm president and also a former PA educator, says that different therapies work for different people. She believes that equine-assisted psychotherapy works because patients confront their emotions and deal with them in the moment. The horse senses this and responds accordingly. EAS provides a natural setting in which to face fears and deal with emotions. "It doesn't matter where our soldiers are; the horse seems to always provide a moment of peace, trust and camaraderie," she says. "One person said they'd been seeing a therapist for 20-some years, but a few weeks working with us had accomplished more than that."

As veterans themselves, Riley and Meridith understand the military and the many wounds that confront the nation's service members. Over the past decade, the U.S. has been involved in 10 military operations, and U.S. service members have experienced an unprecedented number of repeated

long-term deployments to combat zones. This has left thousands of combat veterans struggling to integrate back into civilian society while healing from the wounds left by their experience.

The foundation provides EAS in an effort to bridge the gap between traditional healing methodologies and true whole-being wellness of the mind, body and spirit for veterans suffering from wartime afflictions, and law enforcement personnel with mental health disorders and physical disabilities. Meridith and Riley began the therapy program after developing bonds of their own with horses. Riley, in fact, learned to appreciate the healing power of horses while dealing with the challenges of surviving cancer.

On one hand, horses are sensitive creatures that can form extraordinary connections with people. However, they can be nervous when they meet humans for the first time or detect that something isn't right. As a prey animal, it's all part of the horse's basic response to its own fear.

"The horse doesn't have a fight-or-flight response. It's just flight," Riley says. "A horse can feel a person's heartbeat three feet away. If you come out and you're aggressive or angry or frustrated, the horse is not going to



CLOCKWISE: PAs Carmen Meridith and Sahika Riley observe a veteran's spouse during a therapy session; veteran with a horse; veteran walking with Riley; veterans help other veterans during a therapy session.

come near you, and you won't be able to address that horse."

As both Meridith and Riley know, people returning from deployment often feel negative emotions. Many suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and develop substance abuse problems. "We are veterans ourselves and in the medical field, and we realized something else was needed to help them," Riley says. She believes there is a need for alternative therapy such as EAS, and she wanted to help the Veterans Health Administration with the backlog of patients, and believes there is a need for alternative therapy.

The horses' job is to teach people with PTSD that their moods matter. "They come back here from overseas and have to learn how to re-communicate with everybody," Riley says. "They learn really fast the way of the horse, the ways they have to use their body and their attitude to have contact with that horse."

Veterans may be able to convince their family and friends that everything is OK, and sometimes even convince themselves, but they can't fool the 1,200-pound equine lie detector. The horse works as a therapist, giving positive feedback to positive feelings. The horses often have their own history of trauma. Some of the horses who perform in equine therapy come from horse rescue organizations. When the interaction occurs between the client and horse, a natural connection develops. The horse with its previous wounds, whether physical or mental, connects with the wounds of the client, and helps the client develop coping skills. This allows the veteran, first responder or family member to open up and communicate again, Riley says. They learn to trust each other by way of communication, which helps the client transition in a healthy manner.

Four horses—known as "equine therapists"—are on duty: Major, an 11-year-old Tennessee Walker; Skipper, a playful 17-year-old quarter horse; and Bentley, an 8-year old Appaloosa/quarter horse who came from a horse rescue program. The horses have taken part in some 150 six-week classes with

people who suffer from PTSD.

It took three sessions for a horse to come anywhere near one client. But eventually, Riley recalls, "He'd step into the arena, and the horse would run up to him. When we see signs like that, we know they're getting better. The horse lets us know when this guy is where he needs to be." If a horse doesn't want to approach someone, the program's leaders will ask the person what might be wrong, Meridith explains. "You don't really say anything. You just ask questions. When the person answers you, it's amazing. Sometimes a light bulb will go off and they'll say, 'They didn't want to come near me because they fear me.' It builds from there until it's almost like the horses are in their laps."

Multiple specialties are a part of the therapy including an equine specialist and licensed mental health providers/counselors. At Horse Rhythm, the PAs work as a team with the equine specialist and the horses. They assist the equine therapists in watching and asking questions to help their clients recognize the burdens they carry and how to develop coping skills.

In one case, a facilitator told a client to use a marker to write the names of obstacles in her life—a person, an emotion, a thing—onto six rocks. Then she put them into a bucket, which weighed about 15 pounds, and carried it as she led a horse through an activity with barrels.

"You could tell she was struggling," Meridith says. "We wanted her to see the burden of carrying those things, the heaviness. That's the metaphor."

The horse had thoughts of his own: He knocked over the bucket and nudged the rocks, pushing one 4 feet away. It happened to be marked with the name of the client's biggest obstacle.

Not everyone who takes part in the program is unfamiliar with horses. Michael Proscia, a Marine and Army veteran who survived nine roadside bomb explosions in Iraq, took part after



“We are veterans ourselves and in the medical field, and we realized something else was needed to help them,” said PA Sahika Riley of veterans, first responders and their family members.

riding a horse across the country from Virginia to Arizona to raise awareness about wounded veterans. He’d suffered a variety of mental and physical injuries in Iraq, including spinal cord damage, and was decorated with a Purple Heart.

Despite his previous experience with horse-riding, he found plenty of benefits by simply working with horses for a few hours each week. “Even with all my injuries, horses don’t judge me,” the 47-year-old says. “They take me

for who I am inside, and not for who I may appear to be outside with my disabilities. Just being around them is so relaxing. I just feel the stress, anxiety and anger melt off my body.”

Horse therapy does much more than just help Proscia feel less stressed for a little while. The positive effects have extended to his life far outside the ranch, too.

Proscia says he’s learned how to be more confident and better understands how being tense and standoffish can turn people away. The mere memory of being with the horses can have great benefits, as he discovered on the Fourth of July this year. He was attending an Arizona Diamondbacks game, although he wasn’t there to just watch baseball. A charity was presenting him with

a house. Despite his joy at getting the gift, he had a rough moment when the stadium put on a fireworks display. “That’s really stressful when you’ve been blown up nine times,” he says. But, he found a way out.

“Sitting there with all the noise and the light flashes,” he says, “I put myself back to the time I spent with the horses and how calm and relaxed I was. It helped take away a lot of the anxiety.”

Others have responded positively to the program too. “We’ve had two veterans tell us they would have committed suicide if they weren’t in the program,” Riley says.

This is a significant statement given the recent startling statistics that one active-duty member of the Armed Forces per day commits suicide. Research has shown that conditions such as PTSD are directly correlated to suicide. The Department of Defense released a study indicating that 95 percent of its participants who had attempted suicide recognized that they had actually wanted to escape emotional pain. (Read more about the study at <http://1.usa.gov/TgK1wD>.)

Both Riley and Meredith say their background as veterans and PAs—especially their work with families and behavioral issues—has been crucial to the success of the program. They’re familiar with issues that their clients are struggling with, like anxiety, depression and substance abuse.

“Through our years of working with people in family practice, we dealt with a lot of different psychological issues,” Meredith says. They’re also familiar with the pressure facing veterans since they both served in the U.S. Air Force. Riley served more than nine years and was a communication/navigation system specialist for the A-10 aircraft during Operation Desert Storm. During the second half of her service, she worked as a PA. Meredith served 20 years with the Air Force, where she worked as a PA. Proscia and Brandon Rumbaugh, the 23-year-old veteran who lost his legs to a bomb in Iraq, serve as advisers.

Rumbaugh, who lives in Pittsburgh and travels to Arizona for horse therapy, says he managed to gain insight into himself with the help of the horses. “They react the way that people do, just without the talking,” he says. This is helpful to veterans who have been away, deployed to combat zones, in reintegrate with society. This can be very challenging as they deal with the major life experience of war. Rumbaugh reflects, “When it comes to friends or trying to meet girls, you just can’t rush into something. You can’t make someone like you the second they meet you and get what you want right away just because you want it. You have to take everything a moment at a time, work slowly at it.” Working with the horses has helped him gain that insight.

By the end of his classes, Rumbaugh could put a halter on Major’s head and lead the horse around a pen from his wheelchair. “He wasn’t scared, and he wouldn’t stop,” Rumbaugh says. “He wanted to be around me, and I wanted to be around him. He knew I wasn’t there to hurt him but wanted to be his friend.”

Rumbaugh is looking forward to seeing Major again soon. The wounded warrior and the once abandoned horse, both on the road to recovery, will be reunited.

Animal-assisted therapy is an established treatment modality for veterans and others with PTSD and other behavioral issues, but equine therapy is one unique and effective option in treating military veterans dealing with mental and/or physical conditions as a result of combat. Equine therapy is not new and is used to treat many other populations of patients. However, Horse Rhythm is unique among other equine organizations, especially in Arizona, where they are the only one that focuses on veterans and does not charge veterans for their service. The nonprofit organization is supported by money from funding events, donations and grants, such as the one it received from the private foundation of the late philanthropist Andy Stallman.

Horse Rhythm currently leases property to carry out equine therapy. They hope to eventually have their own location to continue their work and add other services. The foundation would like to work with and provider shelter for homeless veterans, homeless first responders and families. While in the homeless/transitions shelters at Horse Rhythm, these individuals would undergo short- and long-term therapy to help them transition back into society successfully. In the meantime, the foundation is conducting classes with veterans from other homeless shelters and transition homes to improve their health and quality of life.

AAPA highlights this work as an effort to bring awareness to the many issues facing our military veterans and their families. If you would like more information about Horse Rhythm Foundation and the life-changing work being done by two dedicated PAs, visit www.horserhythm.org.

To find out more about AAPA’s Caring for Veterans and Military Families Initiative and how you can prepare to treat those who have served us, visit www.aapa.org/veterans and the Veterans Caucus of AAPA at www.veteranscaucus.org. **PA**

RANDY DOTINGA is a freelance writer. Contact him at randydotinga@gmail.com.