

STRONG, HEALTHY AND FREE

MEDICINE HORSE WARRIOR HORSE PROGRAM HEALS POST TRAUMATIC STRESS

Josh Petray

EQUINE ENTHUSIAST

The medicine spirit of the horse brings us peace and understanding. The warrior spirit of the horse shows us wisdom and strength.

Such is the adage of Medicine Horse Warrior Horse, a program offered through Heaven Can Wait Equine Sanctuary for Healing and Learning, a nonprofit based out of Independence Ranch in San Miguel.

Medicine Horse Warrior Horse helps aid in the recovery of those suffering from post traumatic stress.

Humankind has long had a mystical and spiritual connection with the horse – the horse's strength, speed, playfulness and love of freedom is admired. The horse represents all that humanity would like to be: strong, healthy and free.

That's exactly what those suffering from post traumatic stress may experience when coming into contact with the horses at Heaven Can Wait, which rescues horses from serious neglect and abuse. It's a place where horses can find a lifelong sanctuary.

Now, these valiant horses are paying back the community that has helped save them through their work in the Medicine Horse Warrior Horse and other programs.

Medicine Horse Warrior Horse serves active and retired military of all generations, members of the reserve forces, spouses and caretakers/adult family members of veterans. It is offered free for veterans and spouses.

Jackie Iddings is head of the program.

Recently, Iddings and a



Photo by Josh Petray

Jenny Gustafson-Dufor has a warmth in her heart for horses. As a trainee for the Medicine Horse Warrior Horse program, Gustafson-Dufor will help military veterans and others suffering from post traumatic stress develop communication with horses and aid in healing.

crew of mental health professionals and veterans met at Heaven Can Wait for a training session. They gathered in a small room as Iddings went over the complications of post traumatic stress and explained its intricacies, careful to point out that working with a horse, while beneficial, is not a substitute for any mental health treatment.

She expounded on the

process of "thawing out," or recovering from the freeze response, before leading the mental health professionals and veterans out into the grounds of Heaven Can Wait for some one-on-one time with the horses.

They pass by Angela's Sunshine, or Sunny as she's called, was in training to be a race horse, injured during training, abandoned and later diagnosed with Navicular. Sunny was sired

by The Wicked North.

They pass by Pair O' Does, a grandson of Secretariat, who raced three times, lost three times and was neglected. Nothing was wrong with him, but he picked up the bad habit of rearing. So he ended up at Heaven Can Wait. Red, part of a rental pack, stands nearby and is quite comfortable after arriving at Heaven Can Wait with a belly full of sand, suffering im-

mensely from sand colic after fighting for food in a sand arena. The condition was so bad that it resulted in thrashing on the ground from stomach pain. Turns out he's a "wonderful therapy horse," as Heaven Can Wait's Susan Schwartz attests. Mr. Z, on the other hand, came to the place starving to death, "literally a rack of bones," Schwartz said. He's doing just fine now.

The crew passes by all of these horses on their way to training.

Then the magic happens.

They connect with the horses, learn the ropes and prepare themselves for a journey into helping others heal.

Those in attendance instantly connect with the horses.

Cathie Orrick connects with the tallest of the bunch – Gryphon – who she's taken a liking to. The roughly 10-year-old thoroughbred, who has problems with his hocks from jumping too young, is big and can be kind of intimidating.

She's not fazed.

"He's so sweet," Orrick remarked.

The five-foot-something Orrick reaches up to brush Gryphon.

"He's everybody's favorite," she said, adding, "You can't help but like them all. They have such great personalities. They're all super gentle."

Cindy Conn is a veteran herself, serving from 1979 to 1997 and understands all too well the effects of post traumatic stress. Grief, stress relief and therapy are at the core of her mission.

"Some of the horses deal with post

traumatic stress themselves," Conn said. "Part of it is for me, and part of it is to help."

Veterans – especially Vietnam veterans – can perhaps have a challenge dealing with trust, given the way they were

treated when coming back to the U.S.

Horses, said Conn, give that trust – but it must be earned.

"Horses give you that trust," Conn said. "A horse is a real and living thing; it gives them something solid."



Photo by Josh Petray

Alysia Cromer works with equine through the Medicine Horse Warrior Horse program.

Singer, a pinto, strolls by. He, too, suffers from post traumatic stress.

Orrick keeps up her brushwork on Gryphon and talks about how the seemingly simple task can have tremendous effects for recovering veterans.

"When you brush them, it has a very calming effect," Orrick said. "Against their flank there's a warmth, an energy. The negative can flow out of the brush."

One might ask, how is it that these horses are able to recover themselves?

Schwartz just about sums it up in a sentence.

"I just happened to have a happy, peaceful place," Schwartz explained, adding, "All horses would be therapy horses if you allowed them to be."

According to organizers, the program works as follows: Through guided activities with horses one can learn how anger, fear and grief have become part of the body-memory. Techniques can be achieved for moving toward well-being. During activities with the horses, one can

WARRIOR SPIRIT
continued on page 37



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MEDICINE HORSES – from left are Dustin Harris, Patti Tackett, Jenny Gustafson-Dufor, Cathie Orrick, Cindy Conn and Lianne Comeau.