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HEALTH

Veterans support group to start equine therapy this spring

By [LISA HORNUNG](#) | March 8, 2018 5:45 am



Army veteran Jeremy Harrell with a horse at War Horses for Veterans in Stillwell, Kan. Harrell is bringing equine

therapy to Louisville. | Photo courtesy of Jeremy Harrell

After he left the Army in 2008, Jeremy Harrell experienced equine therapy in Kansas with [War Horses for Veterans](#), a nonprofit that invites combat veterans to a ranch for equine experiences. It helped him so much, he said, and he heard the same from others, that he wanted to start something similar in Louisville.

Five months ago, he formed Veteran's Club Louisville, a social and support organization for veterans, with the hope of offering equine therapy a few years down the line.

To his great surprise, the group grew quickly and this spring, the club will offer equine therapy, thanks to a couple who are donating the time with their horses in La Grange, and a certified equine therapist, who will help facilitate the experience.

[Equine therapy](#) is a tool that can be used for all types of people, including children with disabilities, victims of trauma as well as those struggling with depression and anxiety. Horse therapy can help people with anxiety relax and trust the horses, and therefore others in their lives.

"A horse understands things that people don't," said Steve Hamilton, an Army veteran and retired police officer from Mt. Washington. "A horse understands when things are not right with a person, and I've seen it not just with PTSD, or traumatic brain injury. I've seen it with kids with Asperger's or autistic kids, so, it's just one of those things that a horse can connect with you."

A long journey back

Harrell joined the Army in 1999 and was sent to Iraq in 2003, where he did a 15-month tour of duty and worked in a prison camp. When he returned to Louisville and tried to resume a normal life, his re-entry into the civilian world was tough, he said.

"I didn't feel like I fit in," Harrell said of that time. "Like I was in a foreign country, like I was still stuck in Iraq, and I couldn't come out of it."

For years, he said he suffered from sleep deprivation and headaches, had trouble concentrating, struggled with

relationships and had difficulty at work, until a boss, who had been also in the military, noticed.

Harrell's employer suggested that he visit a Veterans Affairs medical center to seek help, and when he did, he received a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder and a mild traumatic brain injury. Harrell was medically retired.

Before he got help, Harrell said he just believed that this was his life after combat.

"This was my new normal. I just don't want these other guys or girls to go through this process. It took me six years to get this help. I remember wanting to reach out to people, but nobody was asking me, 'Are you OK?' Nobody was wanting to connect and help me by telling me to go here, or this is a treatment you can seek or any of that. That's a disservice to veterans. So, I guess I kind of swore in my heart that I wasn't going to let that happen."

Veteran's Club Louisville takes off

Harrell channeled his newfound energy into his social and support club. Initially, he felt the club would be a success if he could get 10 veterans together for coffee. Now, the club has more than 460 members, and Harrell said he is getting between 12 and 20 requests a day to join.



Jay Elliott, left, and Jeremy Harrell at War Horses for Veterans in Stillwell, Kan. | Photo courtesy of Jeremy Harrell.

The group still meets for coffee regularly, but the gatherings have grown to about 20 to 30 people at a time. They do social visits, go to the movies and support members in need. One member's wife left him suddenly, and within a day, the group

had found him an apartment, plus, donated furniture, gift cards and food.

Others find they can talk to other veterans in ways they can't talk to their family members or therapists.

"There's a different dynamic that you have with your veteran brothers than you do with your friends," said Jay Elliott, a former M1 tank gunner in operations Desert Shield, Desert Storm and in Bosnia, and member of the group. "We've done the same things, we've seen the same things, and a veteran's experience ... you really have no idea, to be honest."

The benefits of equine therapy

Elliott also went to Kansas for equine therapy. He said he hadn't spent much time around horses, so it was a new experience for him.

"It's amazing to me how they can look at you and feel your heart rate and what you're feeling," he said. "So the way that you pull the reins and interact with the horses becomes very important. It was great to spend a lot of time getting to know the horses before we actually rode them, and interact with them once you're on the horse."

"It's just a great, great experience, and I can't wait to continue this program that Jeremy's going to start up and give back to the others," he added.

Hamilton said his trauma came from his time in the Army but also his time as a police officer. "I was involved in a fatal shooting, and it just screwed my whole world up. The only thing that actually helped me get through that was equine (therapy)."

Hamilton hasn't had any formal equine therapy, but he has three horses and he says spending time with them is what brings him the most peace.

"I can't explain it because I'm not into the professional side of equine, I'm a trail horse rider," he said. He told a story of a suicidal veteran who was spending time with horses in an informal group. "Then, when he got around the horses, he started to open up, talking, and he started talking to me. I could tell something was going on with him, so I started telling him my story, and he opened up to me, but it was through the horses that guided him to that point."

Camaraderie and giving back

Harrell said his informal group of veterans had likely already saved some lives, too. “There’s been four people that I’ve known in the last five months that I know we have talked out of suicide,” he said. “Just by them calling and saying, ‘Hey I don’t want to talk to my wife about this, she’d be mad or maybe she’d judge me, or I don’t want to talk to my mom about this. I don’t want to talk to the VA because they’ll put me into an inpatient program,’ and we’ve talked maybe three or four hours, but the end result is, they’re alive.”

Jeremy Egan of the Kentucky National Guard said the group helps him because of it gives him the chance to give back. “I kind of have a servant heart,” Egan said. “I wear my heart on my sleeve, and it helps me to help other people.”

He also enjoys the social aspects of it. “I like getting together with the guys and check on everybody,” he said. “It’s kind of a stress relief also, being around a bunch of other people who have the same things in common.”

Hamilton agrees that the camaraderie is beneficial. “You know, veterans understand each other, and a lot of times it’s just cutting up back and forth between the different branches. Once you’re a veteran, it don’t matter who it is, you’re always a veteran and there always seems to be a brotherhood there. That don’t ever go away.”

The [Veteran’s Club of Louisville](#) is for any veteran of any branch of U.S. military service in the Louisville area.

LISA HORNUNG

Lisa Hornung a native of Louisville and has worked in local media for more than 15 years as a writer and editor. Before that she worked as a writer, editor and photographer for community newspapers in Kansas, Ohio and Kentucky. She has a bachelor’s degree in journalism from the University of Georgia, and after a 20-year career in journalism, she obtained a master’s degree in history from Eastern Kentucky University in 2016.



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