

Transforming Veterans' lives with equine therapy

BY RENATA BIRKENBUEL

Nonprofit co-founders and married partners Paul Gatzemeier and Barb Skelton founded Horses Spirits Healing, Inc., in 2014. Gatzemeier said that their accredited equine therapy program is one of only two in Montana.



Town Pump Charitable

Foundation has provided financial support to Horses Spirits Healing on nearly an annual basis for quite some time.

The Town Pump Charitable Foundation donated \$4,000 to Horses Spirits Healing in 2021.

Horses Spirits Healing planned to use the funding specifically for equine-assisted activities and therapy sessions, many for veterans suffering from PTSD—who comprise a big percentage of clients.

Vets' family members, including spouses and children, plus first responders and community members, round out the clientele.

"As far as I know, we're the only center of significance that does equine therapy on the scale that we do it. We're the only ones that do it for veterans, as far as I know," said Gatzemeier, a retired energy executive, an owner of Intermountain Equestrian Center, and president of HSHI.

Intermountain Equestrian Center, 7256 Highway 3 in Billings, houses the nonprofit. It is located nearly 7 miles northwest of town.

Reportedly, about 200 premiere accredited equine therapy centers exist throughout the United States, including the Billings one and one in Bozeman.

In 2020, a total of 57 veterans completed the estimated 1,200 equine-assisted



Photo Credits: Horses Spirits Healing

sessions that follow an active-participation model.

"Total sessions for 2020 were about 10% higher than our total sessions for 2019," said Gatzemeier.

A key ingredient to the success of HSHI is the crew of volunteers who donate time, energy and expertise to the therapy program.

In the 12 months making up 2020, they conducted 650 veteran volunteer sessions and about 1,000 family sessions. Veteran family members participated in about 50 of those. Veteran family members often include children or grandchildren.

According to early estimates, Gatzemeier expected 2021 clientele to increase about 40 percent above the 2020 partici-

tant numbers.

Having started the Intermountain Equestrian Center in 1999, Gatzemeier and Skelton rented the facility to a local private college for equestrian classes for 20 years.

"We built the facilities to meet their growth as it occurred," he said, as the nonprofit increasingly became interested in therapeutic riding.

The nonprofit eventually joined the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship and offer a credential for instructors. Currently three certified instructors work for them.

The typical first three sessions follow a step-by-step procedure:

The client meets the horse, learns how

to groom it and learns the horse's language, then proceeds to an individualized, participant-driven program with hands-on activities and instructor-set functional goals.

"We don't have therapists or counselors," said Gatzemeier. "There are people way more suited for that than we are. What we do is equine activities with faculty, horses and instructors – and if you need a therapist, you have to bring your own. In the case of our veterans, they are referred through the Veterans Administration and they have psychiatrists, counselors and all that."

The program services Yellowstone County and eight adjacent counties.

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About one dozen therapy horses—whose beautiful mugs are posted on the HSHI website at horsesspiritshealing.org—work the program.

"The horses are pretty neat and individually chosen," said Joan Grauman, a HSHI board member, grant writer, community volunteer and long-time nonprofit expert. "They're chosen for their dispositions."

Testimonials abound from veterans who have found "healing to empowerment" success via the HSHI program.

"Working with the horse requires trust which comes with awareness and good communication," said one retired military vet. "The skills that the HSHI personnel impart to me has helped me be more outgoing and comfortable."

Importantly, HSHI offers all veterans – no matter their experience – the opportunity to connect with horses.

"The time that I get to spend out at Horses Spirits Healing is something that I don't think I could get elsewhere," said another veteran. "The staff and everyone out there will make you feel that you belong there. The time that I get to spend out there with my daughter is helping me reconnect and to learn how to be in the moment with

her and just have some fun. I also volunteer and it gives me a sense of purpose again... it is a place for me to go and feel a part of something."

"It is this simple, non-judgmental interaction that helps alleviate wounds, both seen and unseen," reads the website.

Among the programs matched to individual needs and goals are therapeutic riding, equine-assisted learning, equine-facilitated psychotherapy, and equine-adaptive activities that include roping, driving, packing, jumping, barrel racing, equine Frisbee and soccer, trail, modified skijoring, and color guard.

The suicide rate for veterans is three times the national rate and 1.7 times the state rate. Montana is the state with the highest number of veterans per capita, and third highest suicide rate in the nation. Organizations addressing these pressing issues in Montana are a vital part of Town Pump Charitable Foundation's focus on helping our fellow Montanans.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

horsesspiritshealing.org
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