



# Rural Montana

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## HEALING *with* HORSES

EQUESTRIAN PROGRAMS HELP  
MILITARY VETERANS

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# Healing WITH HORSES

Equestrian programs help military veterans

STORY AND PHOTO BY RYAN HALL | RURAL MONTANA EDITOR



**N**AVY veteran and Yellowstone Valley Electric Cooperative member Mark Olsen looked up as he helped get a horse ready for another rider at Horses Spirits Healing, a program at the Intermountain Equestrian Center outside Billings.

"This gave me my life back," said the former Seebees member, who served on a convoy in Iraq, and whose youngest son was killed while on active duty.

"For years, I hardly left the house," Olsen said. "It's the best thing to be up here. I love these horses."

## A needed program

Horses Spirits Healing began in 2014, with current Program Director Amanda Ott taking the helm in 2018. The 501 (c) 3 nonprofit provides free equestrian lessons, including riding and horsemanship and basic horse care, to military service veterans and their families. The program is designed to help those veterans with a traumatic brain injury or who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD.

Ott said the program helps veterans reintegrate into non-military daily life.

"As a way of giving back to the veterans for their service, their sacrifice," she said.

Ott said that while therapeutic rides are a part of the program, each veteran starts on the ground next to the horse. She noted that the program accepts everyone, from experts to complete novices.

"Some people come with a lot of experience, while some don't know the



difference between the front end and the back end," she said.

## Equestrian benefits

Ott said studies show that being around horses lowers stress levels and increases dopamine, which provides a rewarding sensation. She added that horses can sense a human heartbeat from four feet away, and they tend to match the mood of those around them.

"I've seen it where if a veteran shuts down, the horse doesn't want anything to do with them," Ott said.

But if a veteran is willing to work with a horse, even just petting and brushing it, both the person and the animal can be soothed and calm.

"If it's a rough day for the veteran, the horse can bring you to the present and help you get through it," she said.

The horses require the veteran's full attention, which makes them focus on the task at hand and not the past or the stressors in their lives.

Ott said the horses mirror the energy they receive back to the individual, so the program instructors can

tell by a horse's attitude if a veteran is going through a rough time, and ask if they are OK.

The vets learn how to brush the horse, lead the horse in an arena, and ride.

Ott shared one story of a Vietnam veteran who was an experienced horseman. Later in life he had to have his leg amputated above the knee as a result of his exposure to Agent Orange. He went from training horses to being unable to ride.

He visited Horses Spirits Healing, looking for help learning to ride with his new prosthetic. Hearing the gruff tone of the man, Ott paired him with another amputee who had learned to ride. Over time, the Vietnam vet's confidence grew and he again became comfortable on a horse, earning spots as a flag bearer and on the advanced veteran drill team.

"He pretty much learned to ride again with a new leg," Ott said. "He would get that horse to do things I have seen people with two legs have trouble doing."

## Being given a purpose

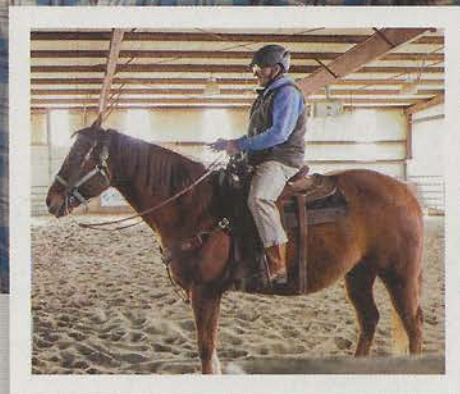
Mike Monschein of Billings gently brushed his assigned horse as he explained how the animal has helped him heal. The Air Force veteran used to go to counseling once a week, now it's just once a month.

He learned about Horses Spirits Healing during a veteran gathering. Monschein said he had a "lifelong dream" of working with horses, so he decided to give it a shot. He found it to be a perfect fit.



**ABOVE:** Air Force veteran Mike Monschein of Billings brushes the horse he is paired with in the Horses Spirits Healing program for veterans and their families.

**RIGHT:** Army veteran Neil Schaub of Billings goes for a ride in the arena.



"It's just calming to me," he said. "I look forward to my Wednesdays with the horses."

Monschein said that in addition to counseling, he self-medicated with drugs and alcohol following a family tragedy. As of the day he was brushing the horse earlier this year, he was 55 days sober.

"The horses help you find your path. They give you a purpose," he said.

Monschein said he is most surprised at how working with horses made him re-evaluate himself and his interactions with other people.

He said that when the horse is having a rough day, "lots of times you have to look at yourself." Realizing that the horse mirrors his energy, Monschein worked to slow how quickly he gets angry or annoyed — with both the horse and people.

"I am slower to anger. I don't let other people affect my mood," he said.

### A better medication

Twenty-one-year Army veteran Neil Schaub of Billings, who served in the Vietnam War, said working with horses "gives me more confidence."

Schaub said he has dealt with depression and anxiety. He has tried several different ways to be treated for those conditions, but found that Horses Spirits Healing has helped him more than any of the other methods he tried.

"You can go to groups, (take) medication and, of course, self-medicate. This is a filler for all of that," Schaub said, noting that working with horses can be addicting as well, but in a positive way.

"This is a great release for me," he said. "They are fabulous."

Olsen, the Navy vet who credits the program with giving him his life back, said that while the horses have helped him heal, spending time with other veterans and helping them learn

about the horses, is also therapeutic.

"Helping each other, it just makes your day," he said. "It takes my focus off my problems."

Olsen remembered a group therapist telling veterans "live in the moment and let the past go."

"That sounds nice and all, but it's never going to happen," Olsen said, remembering what he thought during that therapy session. "But it does happen out here."

Working with the horses and other veterans allows Olsen to temporarily forget about any struggles and live in the moment, enjoying the horses and the company of others.

"I still have my ups and downs," Olsen said. "I wanted to let my memories go but couldn't. Out here, I don't think about anything else. When I come out here, it all just melts away."

"(Horses Spirits Healing) has given me a new lease on life, where I can enjoy life." RAM