THE HEALING HORSE

Mustangs mend war’s wounds
Heroes with hooves restore a victim’s voice
In a place of new beginnings, riding = hope

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A veteran reaches out a hand, and a mustang reaches back. A child who never spoke a word, tells a horse to ‘Walk on.’ A victim of abuse finds pride and self-respect bonding with a retired racehorse.

Something in that instant, in that moment of connection between horse and human, causes wounds and disabilities to fade; for the past to recede and the future to hold new promise. Time and again, whether it is autism, multiple sclerosis or the psychological scars of war, the old saying is proven true: The outside of a horse is good for the inside of a man.

Reach out. Find a new path. Walk on.
MISSION

“Nothing has reached me as deeply, as directly, as powerfully as these wild horses”

Story by Janis Barth
PHOTOS BY MATTEO BRACCO

Thursday morning, bone dry, and the red mustang yearling kicks up swells of dust as he trots along the boundary of someplace he has never been: the inside of a round pen, looking out.
Kathy stands in the center, long whip at her side, as the little gelding clips past her only twice. Master mustang trainer Jack Minner, the constant at her shoulder, keeps a hawk’s eye on the flight of the little gelding and on Kathy, a military veteran who has come to this round pen and this moment for help with the invisible scars of her service.
“Come on, keep going,” Minner encourages as the little gelding steps and turns toward Kathy. The colt hesitates, takes a step forward and for a moment that hangs in the air like a question mark, the veteran and the mustang take each other’s measure.
Kathy reaches out a hand. She will say later that working with mustangs has been her dream since childhood. She moves forward.
The little gelding takes a tentative step, retreats, then approaches again with a wary eye before whirling on his haunches, his decision made: Not any further, not on this day.

The original six wild horses arrived at EquiCenter in 2018, plucked from federal holding pens on what was once open range to join a group of emotionally wounded veterans in search – like the mustangs – of a second chance. On that day, as the vets and the horses met for the first time as part of Mission Mustang, a bald eagle flew overhead. No one could remember ever seeing one in this western corner of New York, but there it was, soaring in a blue-cloudless sky. Veteran, mustang, eagle: Two symbols of American freedom joined by a third.

In the year since, working together, veterans and horses have found a new path to save each other.
Mission Mustang pairs veterans battling Post Traumatic Stress Disorder with captive mustangs experiencing the same feelings of loss and anxiety. Under the guidance of professional mustang trainers Jack and Emma Minteer of Rose Hill farm, the vets gentle the mustangs and – as they teach the horses and prepare them to find new homes – these same men and women find themselves.

“We felt strongly that veterans were a group we could serve and should serve,” said Jonathan Friedlander, founder and CEO of EquiCenter, a therapeutic riding facility tucked into the rural landscape outside Rochester. Veterans in the 10-week Mission Mustang program begin with small steps: getting a mustang who has never been handled to accept human touch and trust their guidance. Quickly, they make the connection between what the horse is experiencing and what they are experiencing.

“Matching up hyper-vigilant animals with stress and anxiety trying to fit back into a herd, with a veteran suffering from some of the same emotions – trying to re-integrate back into society – putting them together, there’s an immediate recognition by the vet that they’re going through the same thing,” Friedlander said. “Where we see the most benefit is the raw stage, when the horse first arrives, because that’s when they’re the most scared. That’s when the connection to the vet is most powerful and the impact is the most profound. One vet told me ‘It was like looking in a mirror.’

“...Learning how to gentle and train these horses gives them a sense of purpose, a sense of pride and accomplishment, a new mission.”

Tragasc Manning, one of 10 veterans in the program, said she recognized that if she was going to help her mustang, Hero, to learn and achieve, she was going to have to change herself. As Hero went from being untouchable to being ridden, Manning said, “Inside the ring, I gained confidence, trust, purpose and focus. Outside the ring ... I really think I have developed greater hope and healing in the process.”

For veterans who are facing an epidemic of psychological wounds, a plague that is causing 20 veterans to commit suicide each day, the need for hope and purpose is crucial. There are approximately 540,000 vets nationwide diagnosed with post-traumatic stress – New York has the nation’s fourth-largest veteran’s population – and it is a moral imperative to help these men and women heal and build new lives after combat.

“Many more may be suffering from PTSD but are not diagnosed,” Friedlander said. “And they can’t be if they want to stay in the military.”

In the round pen, the little gelding trots on. When he stops and turns toward Kathy, allows this unfamiliar human presence into his universe, she lowers the whip and reaches out.

The mustang has been a symbol of independence and vast wildlands in America’s myth and history, but as open land shrinks into fenced range, so do the herds. While some 50,000 horses continue to roam free, there are another 48,000 held by the Bureau of Land Management, waiting for a second chance:

The little gelding spins away. Pick him back up, make him work, Minteer tells Kathy. “Every time he loses that connection, make him work ... If you see him looking at something, don’t you look at it, too. You look at the solution, not the problem.”

She and the little gelding, both trying to find a place in a changing world.
Nathan Bush came home to Honeoye Falls, but he wasn’t the same person. He served in the Air Force for 10 years and planned to make a career of it, but a broken back left him with limited mobility and severe and chronic pain. He never deployed, although he was the team captain, and his eyes darken as he talks about the guilt of watching his men go to war without him.

“They were young and healthy and fit and strong and bright and they came back different people and some didn’t come back at all,” he said. “You’ve lost the work you wanted to do and you’ve come back home and even that isn’t there for you anymore.

“I felt I’d failed at everything I trained to do for so long.”

After years of refusing treatment because he didn’t feel worthy of help, Bush met with a chiropractor at the Veterans Administration who suggested he contact EquiCenter. He started in the horticulture program, moved into equine therapy and began training the first group of Mission mustangs.

“Nothing has reached me as deeply, as directly, as powerfully as these wild horses,” he said. “They opened my heart and I began to be of service again.”

As the first four mustangs in the program ready for adoption, they carry with them a special piece of each veteran and the hope that this success can be repeated nationwide. Mission Mustang is a pilot, selected by the BLM to create a single, far-reaching program that can address the needs of both America’s veterans and mustangs.

And so, tucked inside the already big hearts of Trooper, Sarge, Liberty and Freedom, now gentled and willing, is the prospect of a meaningful life for many more.

“Replicating the Mission Mustang program will have a profound impact on the tens of thousands of waiting mustangs and veterans,” said Friedlander. “The BLM wants this to be a model that can be replicated across the country. Obviously EquiCenter can’t put a dent in the number of mustangs and vets that need help, but we do see this as a national program and that we can be a multiplier of good works ... We want to serve locally but impact globally.”

Their veterans, he said, have realized profound changes from working with the mustangs, gaining trust and new skills. Together, the vets form a community of understanding and camaraderie, giving them an opportunity to reconnect. Their hearts, too, have been gentled.

“Military people have scars — some physical, some unseen — and when you see this horse, this other being with scars, it gives hope for the future,” Bush said. “I’m once again part of a purpose that’s beyond myself, and that’s part of the military makeup, to serve something that is beyond yourself. As we learn how to heal our traumas, the horse and the veteran, we’re doing it together.

“No man left behind.”