



Each horse on the Trail to Zero ride goes through extensive preparation to handle bustling city environments.



ONE HOOFBEAT AT A TIME

Meggan Hill-McQueeney and her team at BraveHearts help veterans through equine-assisted services and are raising awareness for veteran suicide prevention with their Trail to Zero ride.

STORY BY CARLY BILLINGTON • PHOTOGRAPHY BY MCFARLAND PRODUCTIONS

The healing power of horses has been recognized for centuries, with their intuitive nature and gentle strength offering a unique form of connection that transcends traditional therapy methods. For Meggan Hill-McQueeney and her team at BraveHearts, facilitating these connections and sharing their passion for horses with others creates a lasting impact on anyone they come in contact with.

Lifelong horsewoman Meggan Hill-McQueeney, who was inducted into the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame in 2023, became involved with equine-assisted services by chance, something that completely changed the trajectory of her life. She now serves as the president and CEO of BraveHearts — the largest Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International program in the country. The organization is renowned for its veteran and Gold Star family equine ther-

apy programs. It offers therapeutic horseback riding, equine-assisted psychotherapy, hippotherapy using speech-language pathology, physical therapy, and occupational therapy.

An English competitor through high school, Hill-McQueeney was given the opportunity to ride horses for clients while attending the University of San Diego. After graduation, she got a job running a 140-horse ranch in Colorado, where she was introduced to a family who had a son with Down syndrome.

“It was definitely the grace of God. The family knew my lesson horse and had asked me if I would help their child by putting him on a horse and asked to have his occupational therapist come with him to watch his first ride,” Hill-McQueeney recalls. “He signed ‘horse.’ This little boy, Tim, was nonverbal, didn’t walk, didn’t talk. His parents were completely in awe that he had done this just from one ride. I had some clients whose horses I rode and



trained, so I took them on a trail ride a couple of days later and told them the story about this little boy. The client was in awe and gifted me a check to start programs to help more kids like Tim.”

So, she did exactly that. Her first therapeutic riding program began around 1995; then, she immersed herself in the industry. After finding great success with her new venture, Hill-McQueeney began helping to train therapy horses and working with children with different diagnoses. Then, she received an offer to move to Illinois, outside of Chicago, to start a cutting horse operation, where she fell in love with the event and the Western performance industry.

While still running the Colorado program and cutting horse program, Hill-McQueeney’s clients suggested she start a sister program for children in the Chicago area. After partnering with the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago (now the Shirley Ryan AbilityLab), Hill-McQueeney and her team of horses began working with many children who were amputees — a cause that hits close to home for Hill-McQueeney, as she was born a congenital amputee, being born without her right arm.

Years later, around 2009, she was introduced to BraveHearts, where she fell in love with working with veterans. After sensing the need for the services BraveHearts had

to offer, Hill-McQueeney made it her mission to grow the program. What began as one farm, a handful of veterans and a small therapeutic riding program, has evolved into two year-round operations, 53 horses and the ability to serve more than 1,000 veterans per year at zero cost to the veteran.

After being made aware of the staggering statistic that 20 veterans die by suicide each day in the U.S., Hill-McQueeney and her team established Trail to Zero, a 20-mile ride, in 2017.

“I was in a meeting with veterans, and we got on the topic of suicide, and they were telling me how prominent suicides were and how many of their peers they were losing to suicide,” Hill-McQueeney says. “That same day, I had another veteran ask me if I wanted to do a ruck for reducing suicide. It made me wonder if we could do that with a horse. That weekend, a friend of mine called and asked if I would want to take veterans to New York City. I asked if we could do it on a horse. He said, ‘Why not?’ so we decided to do a pilot ride first with some horsemen to try it out through New York City. We did it, and it took a really long time, but I wondered if we could create a whole mission to reduce suicide in the most prominent places in the world.

“Then, again, by the grace of God, a friend connected us with the New York Police Department Mounted Unit. We explained what our mission was: to ride

horses with veterans through the city to try to tell the public that the number of veteran suicides is too high. We’re going to tell the stories of how much these horses have changed and saved veterans’ lives.”

Since the first Trail to Zero ride in New York City, BraveHearts has traveled to numerous cities across the country and the beaches of Normandy, France, for D-Day in 2023. BraveHearts has gained partnerships with multiple Mounted Units. With 26 rides under their belt, Hill-McQueeney and the BraveHearts team have no intentions of stopping until the number of veteran suicides reaches zero.

“It has completely exceeded where I thought it would go,” Hill-McQueeney states. “Getting the public’s attention and attracting people, veterans specifically, to horses is awesome and has always been our main message. It’s also about how hard the veterans who are on these rides work on their horsemanship to be selected for these rides, the amount of purpose it gives the veterans who are on the rides, and being able to tell others about the real power of horses. I know how much horses mean to me, but then you see how much they’re bringing people out of their darkness.

“That trust is such another huge piece of self-discovery that it is found constantly, daily, hourly in our barn between veterans and horses. We can see it week-to-week, month-to-month, year-to-year, however long they want to keep coming back, but you can also see it in one session,” Hill-McQueeney continues. “Empowerment is a big thing at BraveHearts. We’re not afraid to take chances on these individuals who have fought for our country and our freedoms. If we give them the right equipment and the right coaching, they’re capable of anything.”

While serving veterans’ needs is a major driving factor for BraveHearts, they also take immense pride in the care of their equine partners. Every step they take involves setting their horses up for success.

“It’s really important that we offer our horses world-class training and treatment so they can continue to do great work. I know how hard it is to find special therapy horses. We do everything we can to make sure we take exceptional care of ev-



Mounted police units play a pivotal role in the success and impact of Trail to Zero rides.

everything they need so they can do their job because they're doing the hardest job of all," Hill-McQueeney praises. "There's so much that goes into the preparation and exposure for these horses. They're the first one to go through Times Square, the first one to go over the bridge, and there's no pause. There's no worry. I have so much admiration for them."

Hill-McQueeney's beloved horse, Hank, was named the 2023 American Quarter Horse Association-PATH Intl. Equine-Assisted Services Horse of the Year for his impact in therapeutic riding. Now 32-years-old, Hank has led 18 Trail to Zero rides and has set the precedent for the rest of their herd.

"Trail to Zero would not have been possible without Hank and the immense trust I have in him. He's my 'heart horse,'" Hill-McQueeney says.

"When I was talking to the president of AQHA and others, I was telling them if

we didn't have the AQHA, if we didn't have American Quarter Horses, there wouldn't be programs happening across the nation," Hill-McQueeney says. "We've got a little bit of everything, but the majority of our herd is American Quarter Horses. Their mindset, versatility, and try is exceptional. Just watching how much pride and connection the veterans have with these horses is unbelievable.

"I remember shortly after I started at BraveHearts, a veteran told me they wouldn't be here if it wasn't for this program. I knew what horses could do for kids physically, and had always seen that side of how powerful horses were, but no one had ever told me that they might not be alive if it wasn't for a horse," she continues. "I never knew the emotional impact horses offer veterans and the unfathomable peace they hadn't found with conventional therapy. I kept hearing that again and again. This is weighty. It's amazing

hearing how much horses are touching veterans' lives." 🐾

GET CONNECTED WITH BRAVEHEARTS & TRAIL TO ZERO

Wanting to get involved or experience therapeutic riding for yourself, but don't live in Illinois? BraveHearts has a database of centers similar to theirs across the nation, including ones they mentor and try to help grow their veteran programs. The organization also has a transportation grant for veterans in crisis needing services at BraveHearts.

Visit braveheartsridding.org to get involved with BraveHearts or learn more about Trail to Zero. Follow BraveHearts Therapeutic Riding on Facebook. Follow @braveheartsridding on Instagram.

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