



BRAVEHEARTS SAVES VETERANS' LIVES AND DRAFT HORSES PLAY A CRUCIAL ROLE

BY HEATHER SMITH THOMAS

BraveHearts is a nonprofit organization based in Illinois which started more than 20 years ago as a therapeutic riding program to help children, adults, military veterans and veterans' families. Along with offering a variety of innovative programs and events on-site at their two farms, BraveHearts has a nationwide initiative called Trail to Zero—a Ride to End Veteran Suicide. Trail to Zero includes veterans and support riders from BraveHearts along with local mounted police units. This 20-mile ride is held in cities across the country to raise awareness for how healing horsemanship can support military veterans and individuals with suicidal thoughts. The number 20 is significant; statistics show that

20 Veterans die by suicide each day in the United States. The goal is to demonstrate how healing horsemanship can help reduce that number to zero.

BraveHearts depends on dedicated people—staff and volunteers—who believe in the mission and goals of this amazing

organization. Meggan Hill-McQueeney, President and CEO, has a long history with horses, and in 1995 began two programs for children with special needs. “I was invited to BraveHearts to judge a horse show. I was curious about integrating horses into therapy for veterans. I’d never done anything like that with adults; my specialty was kids and helping them get to highly competitive levels including Special Olympics.”

She judged a few horse shows for BraveHearts, and got to know the founders, Marge and Dr. Rolf Gunnar. “I began to understand their vision and passion. I offered to volunteer and do consulting, but they wanted me to work for them in a larger capacity. I was invited to help run a retreat and teach classes, and immediately fell in love with



Huff, the gorgeous Percheron-Paint cross, is one of the most popular BraveHeart mounts.

teaching Veterans.”

She'd been working with children for 20 years and knew the power of horses in helping kids who were non-verbal, getting them to talk, or encouraging wheelchair-bound children to walk. “I knew the incredible milestones young children can make with therapy horses, whether they have cerebral palsy, Down syndrome or are on the spectrum for autism,” said Meggan.

“When I started teaching veterans, many of them told me they probably wouldn't be here if it wasn't for horses. Horses can influence physical and cognitive healing, but can also heal the mental and emotional side and keep people alive who are contemplating suicide. Working with horses gives them a reason to get out of bed in the morning, helps them stay sober, and helps some of them sleep at night when they've been struggling with post-traumatic stress,” she said.

She became more involved with BraveHearts and took over the reins about 15 years ago. This organization has incredible horses, some donated and some purchased, including draft horses and draft-crosses. “The first draft horse came to BraveHearts before I did. He was a half-Percheron named Boone. He and his sister were purchased for BraveHearts but the sister didn't possess the attributes to be a therapy horse. Boone did, and he served in the program for many years. His main job was riding lessons for veterans, and therapeutic riding,” Meggan said.

“About 15 years ago we purchased a Clydesdale named Lucky. He drove and rode, and pulled a sleigh for retreats. We lost him in 2023, but he was in our program for 13 years. Lucky was in our drill team and horse show; he was an awesome all-around horse with a wonderful disposition and a lovely gait.”

The third one was a beautiful sorrel and white tobiano Percheron/Paint cross named Huff. He was the biggest, nearly 18 hh. He was awesome, and one of the main forces in our veterans program in our drill team and horse shows—and the first draft horse we took on our 20-mile Trail to Zero rides. The only downside was that he took up three or four spaces in the trailer when we hauled horses to



Huff poses with his friend, Nick, for a portrait. BraveHeart horses possess a calming and comforting nature that is therapeutic for struggling veterans.

those rides,” said Meggan.

The fourth one, added about five years ago is Beau—a draft-cross raised and trained by MJ Wowk in Canada. “We loved his size and demeanor, but also his training. MJ had him very soft in the bridle and rode him like a riding horse. It's great when horses come to us with a solid foundation—exposed to many things and maybe used on a ranch—with a very good handle.”

Not every person with a disability or disabled veteran can use two hands on the reins and plow-rein a horse. Some have had a stroke or injury and can't cross midline with the reins. Horses that are adaptable to any style of riding are great.

“Finding good draft horses is one of the hardest challenges; horses that have the size, structure and soundness along with a good mental attitude. I want horses that are physically and mentally sound, with a good handle. Many draft horses have worked outside, but I also need them to be able to work in an arena and be soft and round in a circle,” Meggan stated.

“We used to drive our draft

Beau with one of his veteran friends.



horses but we don't offer driving anymore. You have to maintain certain standards and have a certified driving instructor—which I am not. We lost our incredible driving instructor about a decade ago to cancer. We still have the carts and harness, but now we just use those big

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Veteran instructors observing the riders.

Bravehearts Saves Veterans' Lives continued
horses for riding.”

They are great to carry larger individuals and people with certain disabilities. “Many therapy programs have weight restrictions for riders. On our applications we ask people for their height and weight, but we try to make riding available to all participants. This requires

some big solid horses. Even a small person might be sitting off-center because of a certain physical condition that makes it impossible to have the structural alignment to stay centered on a horse. This can be hard on the horse,” Meggan said. The big draft horses can handle it easier. “We are in the process of getting our next draft horse. They are not easy to

find, but when we do, we really love them. The one I’m looking at right now is a Brabant-cross,” she said.

“The veterans love our drafts; many veterans gravitate to them and spend time with these big horses—whether just grooming them or doing ground work or riding them. Each big horse over the years has had his own special bit and bridle, and ginormous halter. The first year we had Lucky, the big shoes for him cost \$250 and I wondered how we could afford that. But he more than made up for the extra costs.”

The horses Meggan has selected have been very mellow and slow-gaited—perfect for a timid rider. The rider gains confidence because the horse isn’t spooky; many riders need a mellow bomb-proof horse.

The horse’s size can be intimidating, but the horse is totally calm. “The rider senses how compassionate and kind that big horse is, and how forgiving. Beau is an absolute star and one of the most heavily-used horses in our program. I was looking at our 2024 statistics and noticed that in our herd of 54 therapy horses, he



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is at the top in terms of the horses the instructors want to use!” Meggan said.

“Before I went to see Beau, I had MJ send me photos of the horse and they were nothing fancy. The horse had his head turned the other way, and it was hard to make out what he really looked like.” MJ brought the horse to a sale in Wyoming, and Meggan drove out there to see him.

“That horse was drop-dead gorgeous with big dark eyes, a black forelock that trickled down to his nose and dapples on his hindquarters. He was so beautiful, and more stunning in person compared to the photos MJ sent me. Everyone at our barn calls him Fabio because he looks like a model; he gets a lot of attention and he loves it.”

When MJ was showing her the horse, he asked a lady nearby if she’d like to try him. She agreed, then fumbled up the mounting block. “MJ and I looked at each other, realizing she wasn’t much of a rider. But she just crawled up on him and it took her a couple minutes. Beau stood patiently, and MJ looked at me and I said ‘Yes!’ This is the kind of horse I want!”

Beau is one of the regulars at BraveHearts and goes on all the Trail to Zero rides. “Nothing fazes him, and the mounted police who ride with us drool over him. MJ sent me a video of Beau when he was still in training back at his ranch in Canada—of him roping a bull and having to drag that bull across a creek and into a trailer, single-handedly,

just MJ and Beau.”

BraveHearts is always looking for more draft horses for their program. Meggan feels it’s a tragedy that some young draft horses are sent to other countries for meat. “This breaks my heart because so many of them could have a career as therapy horses. Even if it’s not at BraveHearts, there are programs across the nation in need of special therapy horses, including draft horses. Without our draft horses, we would not have a veterans program!” She hopes more draft horse owners and breeders might consider donating or selling horses to one of these programs.

Bill Mercurio is a Vietnam veteran who is very grateful to the draft horses at BraveHearts. He learned about BraveHearts in 2015. “My wife discovered that veterans can ride for free. She had a horse once and loved to ride, so we went out to the farm. I had never ridden a horse. I was born in Chicago, a city boy, and my knowledge of horses was zero. I’d heard stories about them not being particularly bright. Our first time out there, we got a chance to tour the barn and see the horses. This really affected me because I am an animal lover, and I realized these are very comfortable animals to be around,” he said.



A veteran rider prepares for a Trail to Zero Ride.

“I spent more time out at the barn, and did the typical stall cleaning, grooming, and finding out what horses were all about. BraveHearts conducts classes for volunteers to learn how to handle horses. My wife told me I had to sign up to ride in order for her to ride; a veteran can ride two hour-long sessions per week, and their significant other or immediate family member can ride once a week. She’d get to ride for free as long as I was on horseback, so I decided to give it a shot. I’d become so comfortable around these horses that I wanted to be on their backs. The big draft-cross named Boone was the one I started on,” said Mercurio.

“He was a sweet horse but if you didn’t conduct yourself properly on his back, he’d just balk, like ‘Nope. I’m not doing it.’ I found myself making sure my signals were appropriate in the things I wanted him to do. He was a great teacher.

“I had a very close relationship and good rapport with that horse. He finally decided that I could actually ride so he helped me along.” Mercurio saw other veterans experiencing the same things, realizing it was not only comfortable to be working with horses, but appealing to their inner selves

At BraveHearts, he saw veterans struggling at first and then the light

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Handsome draft-cross therapy horses, Beau & Boone, do their part in the prevention of veteran suicide.



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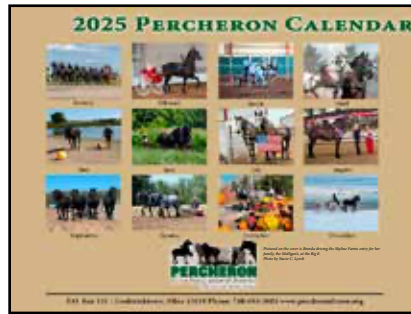
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bulb would go on and they'd have a great experience with the horses—calming and comforting. “The ones who were struggling with PTSD would be looking forward to coming out and riding because of what it did for them. It reduced their anxiety,” said Mercurio.

Horses have an inherent ability to sense what a person needs. “I believe God created them with an empathy and understanding that is often unexpected. They have an ability beyond just physiological things like being able to smell adrenaline; they can sense a lot more. My wife always rode a horse named Neal, and I was with Boone and we'd walk the pastures with those horses,” said Mercurio.

“We spent hours out there, and the level of comfort and empathy those horses gave us was amazing. They'd put their heads down and just walk along with us at whatever pace we were walking. If we wanted to stop, they'd stop, and just be there for us. It was such a holistic kind of feeling and amazing connection. The horses were sharing themselves, connecting with us with no expectations,” he said.

Most satisfying was working with someone who was at first reluctant to get on a horse. “They'd be stressed or uncertain, but as they came back week after week, I could see the progress—not only in their abilities to ride, but also becoming more open in their conversation. They'd start talking to other veterans,” said Mercurio.

“A guy who'd been just sitting in his house watching television is now outside and able to communicate again, opening up to what life can be. A veteran, especially a combat veteran, should not be isolated because that's what's so debilitating and where a lot of suicides come from—the depression and feeling totally alone and unable to find their way out of it,” he said.

“My opportunity to see the change in these veterans helped change me. I became more forthcoming in my conversations, not only about my own story but my son's passing and how that affected me. I was in a really dark place, and without my time with horses, I would not be here today,” he said.