

Miniature Horses Help Humans

By Mary Cate Mannion - [email](#)



You've probably heard the saying, "lending a helping hand." But, how about a helping hoof? That's what the miniature horses at the Triple H rescue in Mandan will be doing as part of a therapy program. Founder Alison Smith says the Horses Helping Humans program is for people of all ages and can benefit those with mental disabilities or physical handicaps.

"If you can open up communication between a child and a horse, they may further open up communication with a child and a parent, or a child and a caretaker. Someone who hasn't been very good at communicating may now think if I can communicate and get my point across I can really start improving my life," says Smith.

The program has just started, and the cost for once a week monthly sessions is about \$300.

Horses4Heroes helps military members unwind

Las Vegas, NV (KTNV) -- We're used to seeing them in uniform and on base. But recently, a group of our heroes from Nellis Air Force Base stepped into civilian clothes and hopped on the back of a horse. And they're getting to do it at [Horses 4 Heroes](#).

It's a working ranch where heroes get the chance to ride and work with some of the most majestic animals on the planet.

Horses4Heroes recently hosted airmen and women from Nellis and Creech Air Force Bases.

Sheila Johnston is the Public Affairs Director for Nellis Airforce Base, "We try to keep a lot inside bottled up. We're supposed to be strong warriors, and we are. And we do that well. But we need to find that relief valve so we can be better for our families and our team."

The stress these fighting men and women are under is unique, so learning to cope with stress in a unique environment seems fitting.

Along with team work, founder Syd Knott said the heroes learn to trust themselves again, "I have vets who come out here who spend the whole time talking to a horse. Things they can't say to family or other soldiers. They talk to the horses."

One of the women lost both of her parents while she was deployed to Iraq. Grieving was a privilege she couldn't afford.

It's these kinds of stories the horses hear. Johnston says, "I think it's important because we don't always know how to deal with every day stresses on top of the other pieces that work brings."

[Horses4Heroes](#) makes horse back riding affordable for all sorts of heroes including firefighters, police officers, even victims of domestic violence.

It's a national program now, but Syd founded the program right here in Las Vegas.

<http://www.ktnv.com/news/MLVABPTL/Horses-4-Heroes-helps-military-members-unwind-223307241.html>

ZEAL Program at Zuma's Rescue Ranch

At Zuma's Rescue Ranch, the ZEAL Program combines Animal Assisted Coaching and Experiential Learning to help veterans rebuild trust and confidence, as well as, refocus their attention to giving to the horses while healing their broken minds and bodies. "The skill developed working through life's challenges with equine therapy partners is one that cannot compare to traditional educational models, says Jodi Messenich, Executive Director of Zuma's. "The partnering with horses once destined for slaughter brings a level of compassion coupled with a desire to help another being. Those life lessons are creating compassionate hard working young men and women to lead our next generation."

Soldier Buddies at Riding Star Ranch

The Soldier Buddies program at Riding Star Ranch matches returning military soldiers and military veterans with at-risk youth between the ages of 12-22. The military veterans serve as positive role models and help instill morals, character, and essential life skills to their young "Buddies". Together, the Soldier Buddies care for a program horse including learning how to ride, and even how to drive, in the structured equine-assisted environment. The human benefits of the program include learning responsibility, compassion, self-esteem, trust and teamwork among other social and life skills. The horses involved in the program benefit from the socialization and retraining while receiving loving, hands-on care from the Soldier Buddies. These aspects are vital to the re-homing and adoption of the rescue horses.

Prison Programs Provide Second Chances For Inmates And Horses

By: Gavin Ehringer and Julie Stein with additional research by Michael DeYoanna



After his involvement in the James River Correctional Facility's Second Chances program, Tamio Holmes was released from prison in 2011 and started his own farrier business in Hanover County, Va. Photo by Debby Thomas.

Across the nation, equestrian programs built around everything from rodeos to rehoming Thoroughbreds to training wild mustangs are helping rehabilitate the incarcerated.

When Tamio Holmes was sentenced to prison on drug dealing charges in 2003, he hit rock bottom. He'd already spent more than two years behind bars starting in 1998, and now he was facing another eight.

"I felt like, 'Screw you,' " Holmes says of the day the judge sentenced him.

That moment of raw anger peppered with indifference eventually turned to numbness as prison life became his everyday reality. Days slipped into months, and more than five years passed. But finally Holmes got a break that would ultimately reverse the negative trajectory of his life.

It came, poetically enough, because of others who also needed a hand: Thoroughbred horses. Holmes would find his rehabilitation—and eventually a career as a farrier—in helping to

prepare the horses for new lives. The long days of feeding, grooming, exercising the horses and taking classes on their care gave Holmes a renewed sense of purpose.

“It was exhausting, but I couldn’t wait to get up the next morning every day and get back out,” Holmes says. “I was helping them, and they were helping me feel better about myself.”

Holmes is one of 50 inmates to graduate since the [Second Chances program at the James River Correctional Center near Richmond, Va., was created in 2007](#). Run in cooperation with the [Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation](#), the program saves former race horses from possible abuse and slaughter. It’s just one of several inmate-horse rehabilitation programs run by the foundation and other entities around the nation.

Anne Tucker, board president of the foundation’s James River chapter, observes the transformation of Holmes and many other inmates. She says the bonds between the inmates and the horses create a sense of self-worth.

“The inmates come in and work with the horses and start to think, ‘I’m not all bad. Maybe I’m not totally useless,’ ” Tucker says, adding that the offenders—inmates who committed only non-violent crimes—learn not just job skills, but a sense of community.

As for the horses, they vary. Some are young and fresh off the track; others are in their 20s. In five years, James River has placed 26 of them. A few horses have the potential to compete again in second careers, while the reality for others is simply a lifetime of pasture ornamentation. Whatever their abilities, Tucker says, James River has a place for all horses to be loved.

For Holmes, the program brought back good memories of his boyhood in rural Louisiana.

“We had horses when I was a kid,” he says. “So horses were always kind of like a friend to me. More than that—like a partner.”

Holmes says deep down in his heart, he was a good kid, raised by a loving grandmother, though life could be tough at times.

“Everything you had, you had to work hard for,” he says. “We made do with what we had.”

When he grew up, Holmes imagined a more prosperous life for himself in the Richmond area. But when he got there, he only found low-paying labor jobs and a party lifestyle fueled by drugs.

“I chose to hang out with people I shouldn’t be around,” Holmes admits. “They weren’t my true friends. I was just trying to impress people.”

Those days ended with a ride to prison, and working with the horses was a privilege Holmes earned. He tried hard to be a model inmate, steering clear of trouble. He hit a low in 2010 when his grandmother died, and he was unable to attend her funeral. But he took solace in the fact that his grandmother knew he was in the Second Chances program and was already starting to turn his life around.

“Overall, I found, I was a good person,” says Holmes, who was released from prison in early 2011. “I made some bad decisions. I can’t change that, but I would advise others that there is always hope. There are other options. I look back and think, ‘I should have struggled harder in hard times.’ Now I’m going for what’s good in life.”

And the program taught him something else as well: That there are people out there who don’t give up on former convicts. Holmes wants to repay their kindness, adding that there’s something particularly special about people who love horses.

“I’ve met some of the best people in the world doing this,” he says. “The majority of them are kind and tender-hearted. I think that’s maybe because they’ve had struggles somewhere in their lives, and they know what it means to receive a helping hand.”

Behind Bars, Trophy Buckle Dreams

There does seem to be something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man, and when this famous Winston Churchill quote is mentioned to Warden Burl Cain, who’s media savvy and charismatic in the style of the best evangelic preachers and Louisiana politicians, he nods in agreement.

Cain initiated the equestrian program at Angola Prison in southern Louisiana and looks at horses as valuable, non-judgmental teachers that help offenders learn two important things: The first is patience.

“The second thing they learn is that aggression is not an option,” Cain says.

A visit to the Angola Prison Rodeo or Horse Sale, which take place a two-hour drive from the vibrant heart of New Orleans, is like a good Cajun filé gumbo—there’s a lot to digest.

An open mind and open checkbook are a must for visitors at Angola’s semi-annual events. If you’re inclined, you can bring home an offender-trained sport horse with a Louisiana State Penitentiary registered brand on its hip. For collectors of prison ephemera, there’s a wide variety of prison art for sale directly from inmate artists. Or you can sample fried Coca-Cola while listening to a gospel band of “lifers” play “Knocking On Heaven’s Door.” The Angola Prison Rodeo, held every Sunday in October, is nothing if not a spectacle.

Officially called the Louisiana State Penitentiary but better known as LSP, “Alcatraz of the South” or “The Farm,” Angola is the largest maximum security prison in the nation. It was once

also known as the bloodiest. But for the inmates involved in Angola's equestrian program, it's exciting to see the prison earning a new reputation, best known for hosting "The Wildest Show in the South." This year marks the [47th anniversary of the longest-running prison rodeo in the country](#).

Angola's rough riders are ¼ cowboy and ¾ gladiator, natural-born risk takers with nothing to lose and a trophy buckle badge of honor to win. The Farm is a place where sinners mounted on horseback can become winners again.

After the rodeo lights on autumn weekends have dimmed, however, Angola's less raucous annual horse sale, which began in 2010 and is held the third weekend in April, [showcases the prison's own breeding program](#); the inmates work with Dutch Warmblood, Thoroughbred, Quarter Horse and Percheron bloodlines and train young horses as prospects for sport horses, ranch horses, trail mounts, pony horses at the racetrack or training center, pleasure and service animals.

In this year's edition of the auction, 80 Angola horses sold, going for between \$300 and \$3,500. Some go to police for mounted patrol units throughout the country, a Dutch Warmblood-cross from last year's sale has become a ribbon-winning show jumper, and this year foxhunting folks from as far away as Maryland left with Percheron-Thoroughbred crosses in tow.

Israel Ducre, a longtime resident at Angola, worked with race horses in his former life on the outside. With 22½ years served under his "All Around Cowboy, Angola Prison Rodeo, 2003" belt buckle, he says training horses makes the sentence more bearable. It's hard for him to watch the horses he's trained be sold off to new homes—at this year's auction he said he'll be especially sad to see a bay wearing hip tag 703, a gelding he named Little Pen (short for Little Penitentiary), leave. But Ducre can't imagine *not* being involved with the program.

While many prisons are known more as rehabilitation facilities, Angola isn't one. The billboard just outside its security fence that reads, "You are entering the Land of New Beginnings," is, unfortunately, not a reality for most of the facility's inmates. In fact, over 90 percent of the men who enter will die there.

But for inmates like Ducre, working with horses gives them a reason to keep going and a means to give back to society. And for the ones who will eventually rejoin it someday, the experience will have equipped them for a whole new kind of life.

Saving Mustangs And Men

A similar story is unfolding in Colorado, where inmates take on the tough task of befriending and training American mustangs as part of the [Wild Horse Inmate Program](#). Unlike Angola, however, Colorado's program is comprised of minimum-security prisoners who are brought from their respective correctional facilities to Cañon City, the largest short-term mustang holding and training facility in the nation.

The program, called WHIP, began in 1985 and has grown from including a few hundred wild horses to thousands, according Brian Hardin, who oversees the program. To date, more than 5,000 mustangs have been trained through WHIP.

Known for the toughness that's allowed them to thrive in the American West's harsh conditions for hundreds of years, the horses run free on property administered by the Bureau of Land Management.

Through WHIP, inmates are taught to select wild horses and halter break or train them for western riding and use as trail, youth and handicapped or therapeutic program mounts. Some are used in the Wounded Warrior wellness program at the U.S. Air Force Academy Equestrian Center, just north of Colorado Springs. The project helps troops heal from the physical and mental damages of war.

"They're good horses," says Billy Jack Barrett, director of the USAFA Equestrian Center, adding that he's also heartened to know a few inmates who have turned their lives around through WHIP, some of them finding careers in the horse industry. Many others are still riding.

Allen Heinze, who is serving six years in Canon City for robbery, never had prior experience with horses. Now the WHIP program at the Colorado Correctional Industries-run prison is teaching him to train horses for use by the U.S. Border Patrol. He's learning everything there is to know about them, from anatomy to feeding to training a horse fresh off the range.

When a horse is selected for training, it has never had contact with a human before. It often takes days or weeks—even a month—before a horse will simply let a person lay a hand on it. Halter training comes next.

"We work on getting that horse to face up or square with us," Heinze explains, adding it's a long time before a saddle finally goes on, let alone a rider.

The process is arduous, but rewarding, Heinze adds. "It teaches profound patience."

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Triple R to take Unbridled Potential a step further in 2014

By Rob Cox Daily News Greensburg Daily News - In 2014, Triple R Equine Rescue Ranch will expand its Unbridled Potential program to include "Barnyard Buddies." Triple R assistant and Greensburg director of tourism Melanie Maxwell told the Daily News that, to her understanding, Barnyard Buddies expands upon the principles of Unbridled Potential. Greensburg Junior High School Special Education Teacher Heather Sanders and others at GJHS created Unbridled as an alternative learning program that pairs "at-risk" kids with

horses. The program is geared to help kids learn cooperation, leadership, responsibility, teamwork and patience. Students in the program are typically struggling academically, socially or behaviorally – perhaps all three – with many coming from dysfunctional or strained homes. Kids in the Unbridled program are exposed to the horses and their personalities a little at a time, in gradual steps; contact and interaction between student and horse is increased in distinct increments, with students eventually expected to learn to care for and ride the animals. Organizers hope kids will become adept at working with the horses by the time the program ends, providing a sense of accomplishment and self-esteem. Barnyard Buddies, Maxwell explained, is like a logical next step for Unbridled Potential, likening it to a kind of animal version of “Big Brothers, Big Sisters,” where the horse becomes a mentor of sorts to the student involved. According to materials published by the facility, the “R” in Triple R stands for “Rescue, Rehab and Retirement.” The facility serves as shelter and refuge for horses that might be termed as the animal kingdom’s version of “at risk.” The animals taken-in at Triple R are frequently rescued from abusive or negligent owners or from owners who simply don’t have the resources to provide adequate care. Many of the animals are adopted away from Triple R, but others are considered unadoptable due to physical defects, or extreme abuse or negligence. One such example is a horse named Vincent, who was rescued in 2009 from an abusive home wherein dogs were constantly attacking Vincent and his sister. In the course of protecting his sister from the canines, both of Vincent’s ears were chewed completely off. This horse and his sibling, though, have thrived at Triple R. In fact, the Pet Finder Foundation recently named Vincent its 2013 Comeback of the Year (<http://bit.ly/1ghFDfY>). - See more at: <http://www.greensburgdailynews.com/local/x1221287317/Triple-R-to-take-Unbridled-Potential-a-step-further-in-2014#sthash.ZvGuohS6.dpuf>