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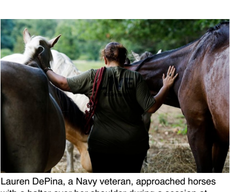
It's the small wins that matter at Project ComeBack, where veterans and rescued horses pair up for mutual healing

By Kate Selig Globe Correspondent, Updated August 23, 2022, 1 hour ago


Lauren DePina, a Navy veteran, approached horses with a halter over her shoulder during a session at Project ComeBack. "People don't understand us as veterans... It's like a fresh slate, [the horses] don't know us," DePina said. CARLIN STIEHL FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

HOLLISTON — Dragonflies wheeled through the air, a breeze carried the smell of earth and grass, and the birds and crickets chirped softly. But Matilda, a 3-foot-tall miniature horse, would not walk across the pasture.

The rescue horse is a bit of a diva, and she can be stubborn. And so can Adam Costello, a 47-year-old Northborough veteran who served in the Iraq War, but he reserves a gentleness for Matilda, "Tilly" for short.

"Come here," Costello said softly. "Tilly, we've got a long walk."

It was an exercise in trust and communication for both, the type of interaction that Project ComeBack aims to facilitate at its 40-acre farm in Holliston through pairing veterans and rescued horses with the goal of mutual healing.

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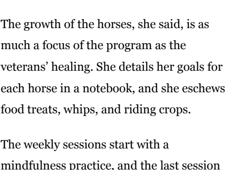
Army veterans Derek Stirk (left) and Adam Costello headed out to the field to work with their respective horses. CARLIN STIEHL FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Over a six-week program, the veterans choose a rescued horse whose story they connect with and then work with the animal, visiting the farm on a weekly basis. As the horses learn to join the herd, the veterans learn to reintegrate back into civilian life.

Many of the veterans in the beginner program, which wrapped up at the start of August, served in Iraq and Afghanistan. One major study estimated the rate of post-traumatic stress disorders as 15 percent for deployed veterans and 10 percent for non-deployed who served in those two wars.

"Everybody has issues and problems that we all want healed," said Lauren DePina, a 40-year-old veteran and Uxbridge resident.

Project ComeBack's 14 horses have their own traumas, and many were rescued from kill pens. The organization rescued Matilda after a friend of the project picked her up from a man who said he wanted to get rid of the horse, even if that meant bringing her to slaughter.


Project ComeBack's executive director, Lindsay Andon, and Navy veteran Lauren DePina reviewed techniques for working in the round pen. CARLIN STIEHL FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The nonprofit was founded in 2017 by Lindsay Andon, who now serves as the executive director. Andon, a 28-year-old with an earnest love for horses, would not describe the work that Project ComeBack does as equine therapy; doing so, she said, does not accurately capture the program's goals and can lead veterans to shut down.

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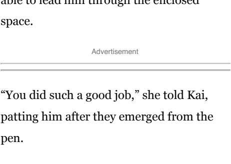
"No one wants to feel broken," she said.

The growth of the horses, she said, is as much a focus of the program as the veterans' healing. She details her goals for each horse in a notebook, and she eschews food treats, whips, and riding crops.

The weekly sessions start with a mindfulness practice, and the last session of the beginner's program began with yoga led by Lauren Turner, 36, a trauma-informed yoga instructor. The six veterans arranged themselves in a half moon, some sitting and some lying down, all with their eyes closed and backs to the afternoon sun. When Turner was silent, the only sound in the pasture was the soft breath of the horses and their footfalls on the grass.

"How do you feel now?" Turner asked. "How does it compare to when you first started?"


Veterans participated in a yoga class taught by Judy Thapa before working with the horses. CARLIN STIEHL FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Afterward, the veterans took the horses one by one into a round pen to practice starting and stopping, guiding the horses with a twirling rope.

Theresa Hughes, a 30-year-old Worcester resident, had a breakthrough with her horse, Kai. Hughes said Kai, a buckskin mustang rescued from a Texas kill lot, would flatten his ears when she first approached him with the rope. By the last session, after six weeks of work, she was able to lead him through the enclosed space.

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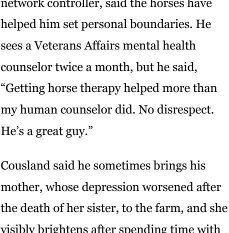
"You did such a good job," she told Kai, patting him after they emerged from the pen.

Hughes said she has gained patience and confidence from working with Kai, as well as camaraderie with the other veterans.

She's a student at Worcester State University, and she said being around students a decade younger can be frustrating. She bites her tongue when she hears them complain about homework, and she tries to remember her military training on transitioning back into civilian life: Don't be too forward, harsh, or loud. But around the other veterans, she said, she can be herself.


Veteran Theresa Hughes bonded with Kai at the last session of the beginner program after weeks of difficulty approaching the horse. CARLIN STIEHL FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Scott Cousland, 57, said he's also gained confidence through the program. At the last session, the Framingham veteran worked with Spirit, a gray thoroughbred whom Cousland described as the leader of the herd, something he couldn't have imagined doing when he started the program.

Cousland, who struggled with drugs and alcohol while in the Army as a satellite network controller, said the horses have helped him set personal boundaries. He sees a Veterans Affairs mental health counselor twice a month, but he said, "Getting horse therapy helped more than my human counselor did. No disrespect. He's a great guy."

Cousland said he sometimes brings his mother, whose depression worsened after the death of her sister, to the farm, and she visibly brightens after spending time with the herd.

And as for Costello, after he managed to lead Matilda across the field, he notched a win of his own in the pen.

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At first, when he twirled the rope behind Matilda, instead of walking forward as he was cuing her to do, the horse turned and rubbed her head on him. He tried again, and Matilda swiped the rope with her tail.

Finally, success: Costello twirled the rope, and Matilda moved in the right direction.

"That's way better," he said, stroking the horse's back and neck.

Costello said he can see himself in Matilda's mannerisms: "When you want to be around, you inject yourself in there, and when you don't want to be there, you turn around and walk away."

He said it felt strange returning to civilian life after exiting the military, and he missed the collectivist culture and clear hierarchy of command. Most services geared toward veterans, he said, don't provide support until people reach a crisis point, but programs such as Project ComeBack can help veterans get out of their comfort zone and accumulate small wins, which build confidence and help veterans get back to feeling like they "can do anything."

"You never know who you're going to connect with or why," Costello said. "We're all carrying something."

At the end of the session, the veterans walked back across the pasture as a group, jostling each other and laughing over their shared successes and challenges with the horses.

Andon encouraged the veterans to take the lessons learned and connections made back into their everyday life.

"All those little victories added up," Andon told them.

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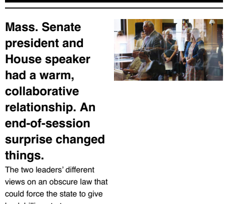
Army veteran Scott Cousland walked his horse to the round pen for the final class of the beginner program. CARLIN STIEHL FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

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