

# Heroes On Horses

## Partnering With Veterans' Groups

*By Mary Vardi and Leslie Esselburn*

**T**he words of our veterans are TROT's best publicity. Navy veteran Rene Suarez, who has been riding at Therapeutic Riding of Tucson's "Heroes on Horses" riding program since its

inception in September, 2006, says, "It has helped me with stretching and flexibility in my hips. My core strength is better, I have improved my balance and stability and I have less pain.

But it's more than just relief from his chronic pain as Suarez adds, "I have found a new social group at TROT and have made friends with riders and volunteers."

It's this feeling of community and



closeness that has made "We Are Family," a famous disco-era song by Sister Sledge, the abiding theme of TROT's "Heroes on Horses" program for veterans. The creation of teams, which include the program's veterans, instructors, volunteers, horses and relatives, has developed into a wonderful family atmosphere every Friday morning.

## Developing a Program

All of this grew out of collaboration with a local veterans' administration group. In April 2006, a therapist in the polytrauma department of the Southern Arizona Veterans Administration Health Care System (SAVAHCS) contacted TROT with a request for a recreational therapeutic riding program for veterans with disabilities. TROT Founder and Director of Therapy Services Nancy McGibbon, MS, PT, HCS, and myself, TROT's director of instruction, gave a presentation to multiple VA departments describing the benefits of equine assisted activities and therapies (EAAT).

The presentation was well received, and the SAVAHCS agreed to fund six participants for the first semester. TROT began by assessing its horses and volunteer needs and purchasing two large endurance saddles. A generous donation provided a SureHands electric lift to mount and dismount riders.

Next, TROT held a two-day workshop in July 2006 to prepare instructors and volunteers to work with veterans. The key presenter was Anita Shkedi, the director of the Israel National Therapeutic Riding

LEFT: A demonstration of the SureHands electronic lift at TROT's "How To Start a Veterans Workshop" in January 2009 with rider Greg Hockensmith and TROT Director of Instruction Mary Vardi (on the right).

Greg is a SureHands regional manager, paraplegic and elite Paralympian in bicycling who tests all the company's equipment.

Association (INTRA) and an expert in the EAAT field for injured veterans. (In 1992, Mary was privileged to complete the therapeutic riding instructor certification course at the Wingate Institute of Israel under Anita's direction. There, Mary gained experience working with injured Israeli soldiers and continued that work for 10 years in her own center at Kibbutz Hatzor, Israel. *NARHA's Strides* carried a feature story by Anita on INTRA in the fall 2007 issue.)

TROT's workshop topics included the different challenges veterans with special needs face and how to set realistic goals for them. Dave Trexler, a severely injured Vietnam veteran and horse trainer, was able to provide valuable insight into how horses have changed his life.

One of the most important elements in the success of TROT's program is the wonderful relationship that the center has been able to build with SAVAHCS. Any program that wishes to work with its local VA to provide services to veterans with disabilities should:

- Network within the VA system to

**"Even though TROT was determined to create a meaningful program for veterans, it was important to be realistic about the impact of adding a new program while sustaining current services."**

find a person that will help identify possible participants, obtain funding and push to see that the program succeeds.

- Be prepared to make a presentation to the different VA medical departments outlining the preparations and plans that your center has made to accommodate the veterans you will serve.

BELOW: Helbent Fraser, a former rodeo rider and horse trainer, is an Army veteran who served in Korea. Currently in rehabilitation following a recent stroke, he is back in the saddle at TROT on Spirit.



- Invite members of the VA staff to your center and demonstrate an adult therapeutic riding lesson.

## Getting Started

The evaluation process starts at the VA with the recreational therapist making the first assessment of an individual veteran who has expressed an interest in the program. The veteran then comes to TROT for an evaluation to determine if the program will benefit that individual and to rule out contraindications.

TROT's veterans range in ages and challenges, from young men and

women returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with devastating injuries to veterans in their 70s and 80s with strokes and Parkinson's disease. The first group of six riders included three with traumatic brain injuries (TBI), one rider with chronic pain, one with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and one who was post-stroke.

TROT's overall goals for Heroes on Horses are to promote self-confidence, build strength and balance and teach veterans to be independent riders. An important part of the program is having instructors and veterans set goals for each lesson that challenge an individual yet remain flexible.

From the very beginning of the program, the "We Are Family" magic began. The atmosphere in these sessions has a totally different character from regular EAAT sessions.

Everyone at a Heroes for Horses session feels like part of a team supporting each other in a new adventure. A number of center volunteers, some of whom were veterans, specifically asked to work with Heroes on Horses. The veterans that rode in the first group of three riders would stay to cheer on the second group of three riders. After the two groups finished, the veterans, the instructor and volunteers would hang out under a covered area by the arena. Soon there was good natured teasing between members of the different military branches. Family members started to connect. The VA recreational therapist often came and became a part of the TROT family.

## Budgeting & Fundraising

Even though TROT was determined to create a meaningful program for veterans, it was important to be realistic about the impact of adding a new program while sustaining current services. A working budget to address equipment and horse purchases and incidental costs and a realignment of



Independent veteran rider Rene Suarez, a Navy veteran with severe chronic pain, has found that riding Bart in TROT's Heroes on Horses program has improved his core strength, balance and stability and reduced his pain.

staff duties gave the center the needed information.

The budget provided a springboard for planning how TROT would find the funds to support the new program. The fees that TROT requests from its participants, and which SAVAHCS covers for each of its veterans, only meet about 30% of the actual cost of a session.

So when the center was ready to launch its program, staff notified our TROT family through the center's newsletter, *Hoofprints*, which reaches 6,500 homes, requesting scholarship support for each veteran. Also, the center contacted local service groups such as Kiwanis, Rotary and Sertoma to get the word out about the program and ask for donations. TROT soon had enough funds to meet the full expense for each rider. The first gift was from a family foundation for \$10,000! In addition, TROT lets veterans know that they are being supported by community members who value their service and are honored to be able to contribute to Heroes on Horses.

## Military Families' Program

In addition to its Heroes on Horseback program, TROT has offered families at nearby Davis-Monthan Air Force Base a half-day "Under Western Skies" activities program. Geared for children who have a parent that is deployed, the program includes western riding games (barrel racing pattern, pole bending and team penning), grooming, spirit painting and individual and group crafts. The riders create a mural about their fun day which is sent to a deployed unit from Davis-Monthan AFB. The day ends with a cowboy barbeque with their parent, the TROT volunteers and the instructors.

The most gratifying aspect is the participation of the center's Heroes on Horses veterans who asked to be included as volunteers. Who knew that these guys and gals were great barbeque cooks and face painters and excelled at arts and crafts!

## Marketing & Community Outreach

To garner further publicity, TROT sent letters to every service-related organization, such as the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, etc. A fortuitous contact with the Department of Veteran Affairs in Washington, DC, assisted in spreading the word. A film crew from VA Productions was dispatched to Tucson to film a segment for "The American Veteran" news program on the Pentagon Channel. In April 2007, the 10-minute segment was aired, and TROT constantly uses the DVD in fundraising efforts. The video is a powerful visual tool for the public to understand the benefits of EAAT for veterans with disabilities.

In addition, TROT sought local television and newspaper coverage to advise the community about the program. Several feature articles ran in the newspapers and three local network affiliates have visited the center to film TROT's riders. A story on one TROT veteran appeared in the September 2007 issue of *Glamour*

magazine. The 2008 issue of *The American Legion* magazine informed its readers about TROT's Heroes on Horses and other centers' EAAT programs for veterans.

As word about the program spread, TROT started to receive numerous calls and emails from NARHA centers around the country asking for advice about starting a similar program. So TROT decided to host a conference on "How to Start a Veterans Program." The first one debuted in January 2009 and had 52 attendees from 18 states, representing 31 centers. A second conference is planned for January 2010.

TROT also began partnering with the Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) this September. A spinal cord injury nurse practitioner from the SAVAHCS, who presented at the January 2009 workshop, put the center in touch with members of the Tucson branch of the PVA. After TROT gave a presentation to five of its members, the association agreed to send four to five riders. To accommodate these paraplegic participants, TROT had Gray's Custom Saddlery

build a custom-made saddle.

Starting last fall, SAVAHCS funded nine veterans. They include participants like Helbent Fraser, 72, an Army veteran who served in Korea, and is in rehabilitation following a recent stroke. A former rodeo bronc and bull rider and horse trainer, he never thought he would be able to ride again. According to his wife Sarah, "His balance has improved, he gets around better, and his smile tells us TROT has brought him to a special place in his recovery...Being on horseback again has renewed his pride and his hope for a return to his cowboy days."

Mary Vardi is director of instruction at TROT in Tucson, AZ. She has a B.S. in special education and has spent 20 years as an EAAT instructor and program director in Israel, Florida and Arizona.

Leslie Esselburn became the first full-time executive director at TROT when she "retired" to Arizona in 2000 following a 30-year career in banking and non-profit management. Her experience in fundraising and grant writing has created growth and financial strength for the TROT program. Both can be reached at [leslietrot@juno.com](mailto:leslietrot@juno.com) or [TROTArizona@aol.com](mailto:TROTArizona@aol.com).

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