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VETERANS ISSUE

Partnering Mustangs
With Veterans

Women-Only
Veteran Programing

Serving Those
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A VETERAN AND MUSTANG FROM
MISSION MUSTANG® BEGIN THE
PROCESS OF MAKING CONTACT.

PARTNERING

MUSTANGS WITH VETERANS

Mission Mustang® Fosters
Bonding and Belonging

By Christina Keim

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF
MISSION MUSTANG®

Army Sgt. Christina “Chris” Hanshaw has her arms wrapped around a fuzzy bay yearling. His black mane is twisted into tendrils, and as she scratches his crest, they push aside to reveal a white freeze mark. Slung over Hanshaw’s shoulder is a leather halter; the youngster has outgrown the one he is wearing. The yearling stands calmly, with a soft eye, enjoying Hanshaw’s attention. But just a few short months ago, his attitude was anything but relaxed.

Tango is an American Mustang, born in a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) holding facility to a dam gathered from Adobe Town, WY. Until he arrived last fall at EquiCenter, Inc., a PATH Intl. Premier Accredited Center (PAC) in Honeoye Falls, NY, he had barely been handled. Separated from his herd and in a new environment, he was distrustful, hypervigilant and anxious.

Hanshaw, who served 14 months in Afghanistan, understood him immediately. When she returned from her service, she became reclusive and disconnected. She suffered from hypervigilance so severe she rarely ventured out in public without her service dog. But working with Tango has changed all that. Tango was so sensitive, “that it takes him more time to trust and realize we are here to love him and not hurt him,” said Hanshaw.

Without further fanfare, Hanshaw slips the old halter off, giving the horse a scratch. She has worked with Tango every Tuesday for three months, religiously making the one-and-a-half-hour drive from her home in Baldwinsville, NY, to EquiCenter, home to Mission Mustang®.

BLM PARTNERS WITH MISSION MUSTANG®

Since 2018, Mission Mustang® has connected two American icons—mustangs and veterans—for the betterment of both. Its existence is the result of a unique partnership between EquiCenter and the BLM; creators hope that Mission Mustang® will serve as a model for other centers across the country.

“We know there are other people out there working with veterans and horses,” explained Debbie Collins, who retired in April 2019 after 24 years as the national outreach, communications and marketing specialist for the BLM’s Wild Horse and Burro Program in Norman, OK. “But my goal in working with EquiCenter was to create an organized roadmap for people who are interested in working with mustangs in therapeutic programs.”

On Veterans Day 2019, Director of the BLM William Perry Pendley highlighted Mission Mustang® as one of the bureau’s shining success stories. “We’re proud to work with EquiCenter and its Mission Mustang® initiative,” said Pendley. “As a veteran myself, I know the dedication and sense of mission our veterans have. Mission Mustang®, which utilizes veterans to help gentle wild horses and prepare them for adoption, is a perfect fit with our agency’s mission and goals. We’re excited to strengthen and expand our work with Mission Mustang®, and I want to thank Jonathan Friedlander and everyone at EquiCenter for their commitment to the health and welfare of our wild horse populations.”

But for veterans like Hanshaw, the experience is about more than just gentling a wild horse. “I’m not talking about my feelings or my experiences. I’m coming and connecting with an animal that does not judge me at all for anything I’ve done, anything I’ve seen. When I’m with Tango, it’s just me and Tango. It’s freeing.” She paused. “I

feel more like myself pre-deployment than I have in a long time. It really has changed my life.”

MISSION MUSTANG’S HISTORY

In the early 2000s, EquiCenter was a new nonprofit when co-founder and CEO Jonathan Friedlander and Collins first discussed the possibility of using mustangs in their programing. With nearly 50,000 wild mustangs and burros in off-range holding facilities and another estimated 88,000 living on a range with a carrying capacity of just 27,000 animals, finding opportunities for mustangs was one of Collins’ top priorities. “Years ago, I wasn’t aware of equine therapy,” said Collins. “But I was at a lot of events, trying to promote these animals. Every time, I kept running into people who would share stories with me. They, or a family member or a friend, were a volunteer at a therapeutic riding program. They would say, ‘We have a horse with a freeze mark.’ That was their connection.”

When Collins was introduced to Friedlander, she was impressed by his passion and altruism. But Friedlander knew EquiCenter wasn’t yet ready for the commitment of a mustang.

“We were essentially brand new,” said Friedlander. “It wasn’t the right time, but it started a relationship.”

For nearly a decade, the two stayed in touch. In those years, the center moved to its current location at the William and Mildred Levine Ranch, a 200-acre property just outside Rochester, NY. The move allowed for growth in their therapeutic riding program and expansion into diverse programing including therapeutic horticulture, farm-to-table culinary program, canine-assisted activities and adaptive yoga. Veterans, in particular, looked for any opportunity to spend additional time on the property.

“Vets would come here and say, ‘We can finally breathe, be at ease and let down our guard,’” said Friedlander. “But with a wait list of 40 riders, the capacity wasn’t there to let them do more riding.”

Mission Mustang® was born out of an official memorandum of understanding between the BLM and EquiCenter. Their goal was to establish a model by which PATH Intl. Member Centers and other viable programs could integrate gentled and/or ungentled horses and burros into therapeutic programs. Specifically, they wanted to use mustangs to create programing addressing the unique mental health challenges of veterans. Mustangs taken from the range share many qualities with veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other invisible wounds; each works to adjust to their new life.

“This was about taking an established facility that was



LEFT:
MARK HANSEN, U.S. ARMY (RET.) AND HIS
MUSTANG PARTNER, TROOPER

BOTTOM:
BRETT AVERY, U.S. MARINE CORPS (RET.) GREET
HIS MUSTANG PARTNER, RANGER.



not working with mustangs, and figuring out how to adjust,” said Friedlander. “EquiCenter is very good at creating networks, getting exposure and building awareness.”

Friedlander quickly set to work building the connections necessary to prepare the center’s facility. (See “Getting Mustang Ready” by Christina Keim.) Collins couldn’t hide her excitement as the pieces started to fall into place.

“It just seems kind of cool to have a horse that’s been part of America’s heritage being able to help a person who is helping America be safe,” said Collins. “That was the passion behind it for me. I knew there had to be a way to get these animals and people together, and Jonathan’s group was so instrumental in pulling together the infrastructure they needed.”

As a government agency, the BLM could not offer any financial support, but they did assist in horse selection and transport. The first group of BLM mustangs—later named Trooper, Ranger, Hero and Sergeant Baker—arrived at EquiCenter in May 2018. Ten nervous yet excited veterans

stood outside of the new steel corral to greet them. As they waited, a bald eagle flew over the property. The unexpected appearance of our nation’s most iconic symbol gave everyone chills.

“Our veterans are mission-driven,” said Friedlander. “We help the veteran to save the mustang, but in the end the mustangs save them.”

TRAINERS COACHING VETERANS

It is a raw, gray December morning following two days of rain that has turned everything to late season mud. A sharp wind blows cooler air, a sure sign of impending precipitation. But none of this is important to Navy Seaman Deneise Henson, who is totally focused on the body language of a chestnut mustang named North Star. She needs to get close enough to the yearling to slip a rope halter over his nose, but so far, the timing of her responses to his behavior hasn’t been fast enough. Instead, the gelding canters past, sending a spray of muddy water over her jeans and patch-festooned vest.

“You’re not making him work hard enough,” says Emma Minter, two-time winner of the Extreme Mustang Makeover. “He can do this all day. You have to give him an incentive not to leave you.”

Minter remains calm as she coaches Henson through the process. She tactfully helps by positioning her own body in such a way that the young horse chooses to stay in a smaller space. After another few moments of back and forth, Henson slides the crownpiece of the halter over his poll and ties a knot just below his eye. Together, they move through a chute and into a round pen. There is no goal for the session—just the experience of two wary beings learning to trust each other.

Minter and her husband, Jack, have been part of

Mission Mustang® since the beginning. Emma’s brother served 21 years in the Air Force, and she welcomed the opportunity to give back to the veteran community. Most importantly for EquiCenter, the Minters have extensive experience starting mustangs from scratch, when the animals are still in their most instinctive, fearful state.

“Mustangs are a clean slate,” said Emma. “They are this fantasy, wild and free. Once you gain their trust, it is hard to put into words what that is like.”

Veterans who join Mission Mustang® commit to a 10-week session; the horses are trained four times per week, each veteran receiving one-on-one coaching from the Minters. With more veterans wanting to participate than mustangs available, multiple veterans partner with the same horse.

GETTING MUSTANG READY

By Christina Keim

Becoming “mustang ready” at EquiCenter meant figuring out three things: physical requirements, trainers and safety. Mustangs don’t require high-end facilities or tons of space, but there are a few basics you will need in order to meet the BLM’s criteria for adoption.

- **A minimum of 400 square feet of corral space per animal (approximately 20’x20’)**
- **Solid fencing (pipe panels, wood posts, 1.5” planks or mesh horse fence) ranging from five to six feet in height, depending on the age of the animal**
- **Appropriate shelter for your region**

The construction of the mustang area at EquiCenter happened thanks to a private foundation grant and a generous discount from WW Livestock Systems in Thomas, OK. With this support, EquiCenter obtained enough steel panels to create several smaller enclosures connected to a larger one, along with a chute leading to a roundpen. To enable year-round programming, EquiCenter was later able to secure a discounted FarmTek cover for the round pen. Friedlander notes that WW Livestock Systems has offered a discount to other therapeutic centers if they mention Mission Mustang®.

The next critical ingredient is finding a trainer with experience with unstarted, nervous horses. Emma Minter, two-time winner of the Extreme Mustang Makeover, said that while previous mustang experience is beneficial, it is not required for success.

“These horses are not abused,” said Minter. “They have been through stressful situations. The trainer needs to be able to work with horses who are fearful.”

But equally important for the success of a program like Mission Mustang® is the ability to make a human connection. “You need someone who can work with people who have been through trauma,” said Minter. “I have been through trauma, and I have lots of empathy for the trauma that vets have been through.”

Once you have these two critical elements, veterans can be introduced to the mix.

“I think their safety comes with having the training ability and the right enclosure,” said Friedlander.

Then, the goal for Mission Mustang® horses is to meet the standards established by BLM for a gentled mustang: to become halter broke, allow all four feet to be handled and to load onto a trailer. The horses all progress at their own pace. Some of the Mission Mustang® horses are now working under saddle; Ranger is even being trained for EquiCenter’s therapeutic riding program.

MASTER SERGEANT LUANN VAN PEURSEM, U.S. AIR FORCE (RET.) WORKS WITH RANGER.

“You don’t end up with a one-person horse,” said Friedlander. “This is ultimately a good thing, because we are trying to place them, and the more flexible and versatile they are, the better.”

Pairing inexperienced handlers with untrained horses may seem risky, but Mission Mustang® participants quickly learn how to stay safe. The Minteers emphasize important basics such as watching the horse’s front feet, checking the position of their nose and being aware of body language; they never allow a veteran in with the mustangs until they have determined the situation is safe.

It is when mustangs are in their essentially wild state that veterans seem to receive the greatest benefit from their experience. “When the veteran and horse are at the same stage, both feeling the hypervigilance, fear and anxiety, is when the veterans receive the most benefit,” said Friedlander. “They build a trusting relationship and help this animal that is under stress to better their living situation.”

BUILDING TRUST

Later that afternoon, Hanshaw is teaching Tango to lift his feet. They share a give-and-take that is as beautiful as the dance for which he is named; small pressure, a toe lift, a release.

“Be confident in yourself and your movements,” said Emma softly. “The more confidence you have in yourself, the more confidence he’ll have.”

Finally, Tango allows her to lift and hold each of his four legs, for just a beat, with a bent knee. Hanshaw gives the horse a hug.

“Watching something like that...” said Emma. “When the veterans open up to me about what this program means to them, it is because the horses have touched them—and changed their lives.”

In the round pen, Henson waves a pink flag next to North Star. Periodically the flag brushes the hairs of his copper coat, and he anxiously steps away. But soon he is standing calmly while Henson flicks the flag up, down, up, down. He has learned enough for one day.

Henson is beaming as she leads North Star back to his corral. Before joining Mission Mustang®, injuries from a 2016 auto accident ended Henson’s nearly 35-year career as a sign language and tactile interpreter, causing the PTSD she had long held at bay to resurface. She felt like her life held no purpose; she considered suicide.

“I’d been really depressed,” said Henson. “I was a mess, because without work, I didn’t have a purpose. It was amazing coming to Mission Mustang®. It was having a reason to get up in the morning, and knowing that the



horses aren’t going to judge you. I was finally finding a purpose and a reason to live.”

She had the honor of naming North Star the day she removed the cord that held his plastic BLM identification tag. To do so, Henson had to remain calm and learn to control her own fear. “In learning how to work with him, it helps me learn how to control my own fight-or-flight,” said Henson.

She strokes his broad white blaze; to Henson, the marking resembles a compass. She slips the halter off his head. “I am so happy,” said Henson, looking at the gelding as he calmly walks away. “In the Navy, if you ever lose your way, you find the North Star. I think the whole point is finding your way back home, and I think this place is a good place to find that, a reason to get out and go on.”

Christina Kim is a freelance writer. Jonathan Friedlander is co-founder and CEO of EquiCenter, a PATH Intl. PAC in Honeoye Falls, NY. To learn more about Mission Mustang®, contact him at (585) 624-7772 or jfriedlander@equicenterny.org. For more information about EquiCenter visit www.equicenterny.org. To learn more about adoption, contact the BLM Wild Horse and Burro Program at (866) 468-7826 or visit www.blm.gov/whb.