



EQUINE SPIRIT:

UNCONDITIONAL LOVE AND HEALING IN AN OVER-SIZED PACKAGE

By Chris Rubich • Photos by Hannah Potes

Ask anyone who has spent time on a horse—the connection is intimate. And, undeniable.

Horse.

Human.

Bond.

The ability to heal follows.

Horses Spirits Healing, a new, non-profit program at the Intermountain Equestrian Center, marries certified equine therapists with military veterans suffering from psychological trauma and physical disabilities.

Some veterans may find it calming to simply groom a horse, while others may enjoy the animal's gentle gait or rehabilitate through more mundane, physical activities like moving hay bales. It is this simple, non-judgmental interaction that helps alleviate wounds, both seen and unseen.

Above: Sleepy a therapy horse at the Intermountain Equestrian Center, casts a gentle glance toward approaching visitors.

HELP FOR VETERANS

The Iraq and Afghanistan wars have swollen the ranks of disabled veterans, but “a lot of other veterans out there” besides “post-9/11 vets” need rehabilitation and emotional support, says Paul Gatzemeier, board chairman of the Intermountain Equestrian Center.

While deployed, service personnel were often aided by bomb-sniffing dogs. Now, Billings and the equine center are turning to another animal – horses – to aid veterans back on American soil.

The center, north of Billings on Highway 3, plans to help veterans suffering psychological trauma and physical disabilities through the nonprofit Horses Spirits Healing equine-therapy program.

Gatzemeier says veterans can interact with horses in many ways – from riding to working in stables to walking horses. Some veterans may find it calming to simply groom a horse, while another may enjoy the animals’ gentle gait or rehabilitate through the physical activity of moving hay bales.

He says the center will seek medical referrals from the Veterans Administration and possibly the Mental Health Center.

The equestrian center has an agreement with Rocky Mountain College for the therapeutic-instruction component. Montana State University Billings helped create a business plan through its business department.

The program is working to have access to three certified therapeutic instructors and a number of horses approved for therapeutic use. Volunteers also will be sought.

Gatzemeier has been making presentations about the program to interested groups.

“Our vision is to be a regional educational, therapeutic and research facility,” Gatzemeier says.



Top: Therapy horses Zoe (left) and Sleepy share an intimate equine moment. **Above:** Mark Lenhart, a resident of Residential Support Services of Billings, strokes the nose of therapy horse Moon.



Top: Matt Sampley and Christina Bochy, both U.S. Air Force veterans, get to know therapy horse Zoe. Above: U.S. Marine Corps veteran Ryan Parsons and certified therapeutic riding instructor Anvia Hampton (left) help Mark Lenhart (seated) lead Zoe around the arena at the Intermountain Equestrian Center.

HORSES SPIRIT HEALING SPECIFICS:

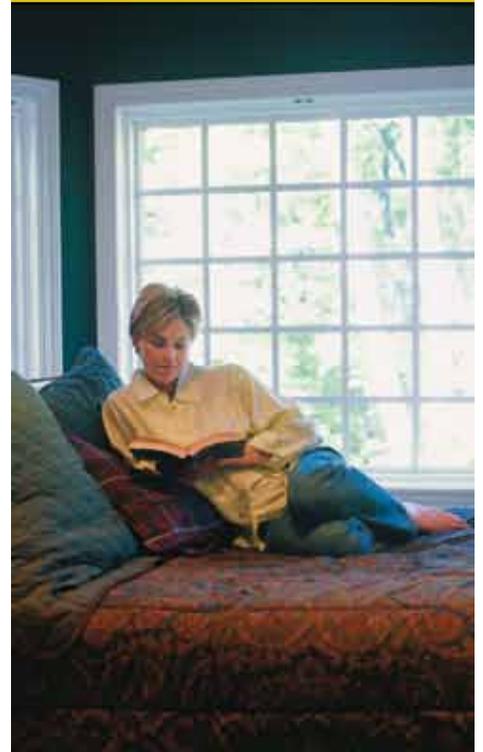
Paul Gatzemeier, co-owner of the Intermountain Equestrian Center, will give presentations about the program to interested groups.

“Our vision is to be a regional educational, therapeutic and research facility,” he said of the organization’s collaboration with Rocky Mountain College, Montana State University Billings and the U.S. Veterans Administration.

To volunteer, donate or learn more about the Horses Spirits Healing program, contact Gatzemeier at 245-4076 or pgatzemeier@earthlink.net.



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Top: Certified therapeutic riding instructor Anvia Hampton, left, teaches new volunteer Christina Bochy, a U.S. Air Force veteran, how to properly lead a horse.

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