“Starting” horses

Before arriving to their new home, the 21 horses now roaming the trail pastured had been traditionally handled, serving only the needs of their owners. “That’s good for us and not for them,” Shannon explains. “We are working on ‘starting’ horses. Not ‘breaking’ them.

If we are ready to help service clients, including Sergeant Gus, retired from service with the Asheville Police Department, the cattle quartermaster’s partner with the police force selected Horse Sense as the ideal place for its retirement. The quality environment created for horses provides a platform that the horses can feel comfortable and safe.

Stevenson cherishes his time at Horse Sense. “It is nice to get a break from the grind and get away from the city life,” he recognized. “I had to do what I want to do, it’s not always work with the horses. ‘We’re not at the top of the food chain.’

“Putting someone in the presence of a horse is a powerful animal,” Stevenson says. “The horse’s sensitivity means the animal reacts and responds differently based on person’s emotional state. ‘You need to be here,’ describes Shannon. ‘Putting someone in the presence of a horse puts your brain in a place where we can do therapy.’

A licensed therapist works in tandem with the horse and the horse professional to address treatment goals.

Serving veterans

Horse therapy is growing in acceptance and practice. Various research studies have found that equine therapy can help reduce stress, ease symptoms of adjustment disorder, and assist in reducing reliance on patients. Some private insurance programs cover aspects of EAP/EAL therapy.

In 2012, Horse Sense created a nonprofit arm called Heart of Horse Sense to raise funds to help pay for the programming. In addition to at-risk youth, Heart of Horse Sense identified the benefits EAP/EAL offers veterans and their families. Serving the needs of the region’s military members became an imperative. “There are also tons of Vietnam veterans in the area,” states Knapp. “We don’t discriminate on discharge status or when they served.”

The benefits of horse therapy to veterans has been tracked in research studies. According to results from a pilot completed at Fort Carson, CO, equine therapy reduced the risk of violence by veterans 24% and the risk of suicide by 30%.

A free-day retreat in October bright lights how time at Horse Sense can benefit veterans impacted by post-traumatic stress disorder, chronic pain and depression — what Shannon calls “PTSD.”

The program assigns clinical professionals and licensed therapists helping the veterans. “I’m thinking of the elderly gut for horses and a partnership evolved,” Knapp said. “As they guided horses through simple tasks, the horses taught the veteran something in the individual.” Shannon observes.

Tim Stevenson of Leicester served in the Marine Corps during the Gulf War and served six years, during the time of the first Gulf War. While in the service, Stevenson suffered a traumatic experience that he didn’t want to think about for 15 years. “It would take me everywhere I didn’t want to go,” he explained. He acknowledged that his PTSD led to challenges communicating with his family, friends and loved ones, negatively impacting his relationships.

Not used to being around horses, he offered how just being alongside the powerful animals while at Horse Sense led to a breakthrough. “I know I have a hard time with communication. It’s been a positive experience these past couple days. Really awesome.

According to Stevenson, a simple exercise that called for him to establish a connection with a horse, led to a real breakthrough. “I realize creating and keeping a relationship is a give and take. I can’t be quiet all the time and shy. I need to put forth effort and get over making first contact,” he recognized. “I had to do that with my horse. I had to put my hand out. Learning how to communicate with the horse opened a new door to use outside here.”

Stevenson cherished his time at Horse Sense. “It is nice to get a break from reality, from the reality of my own problems.” He also expressed gratitude to Horse Sense for helping fund his therapy “It is the only way I’d be able to do it,” he shared.

Casi Brown had always been around horses during her childhood in Alabama. After serving in the Marines during the First Gulf War, she never thought she would be so familiar with teaching such valuable lessons. As five horses wandered about a large area inside a barn, Brown worked with Stevenson to apply a bridle onto a horse’s head. The lesson required the vets to figure out how to work with each other and how work with the horses. “We’re not at the top of the food chain; we’re observers,” she observed. “Our partnership is stronger than our partnership. We get to consider who we’re working with. We’re not always at the top of the food chain.”

Horse Sense offers “Fall in Fridays,” opening its doors to veterans at the end of select weeks for a morning of programming. “We’ve honored and gratified the need to love the land and horses and to service veterans,” says Shannon.

She also expressed gratitude to the local community for their support. “Madison County understood, they got it before Asheville did,” the Knapp’s have invested roughly a half-million dollars into the site, with Shannon adding that it serves as a legacy to his late father. “This wouldn’t have been possible without him.”

Heart of Horse Sense will hold a fundraiser on Monday, Nov. 9 from 6-7:30 p.m. at the WNC Agriculture Center. The event supports equine therapy and will feature a screening of “Riding My Way Through Life,” a true story about a veteran, a horse, and hope.”

Madison County site on leading edge of horse therapy

Marine Corps veteran and Peer Support Specialist Jake LeFain approaches a horse.

November 4, 2015 The News-Record & Sentinel Page 9

Gulf War veterans Casi Brown and Tim Stevenson work together to bridle a horse.