

# THERAPEUTIC HORSES

*Help People Take the Reins*

**Kids aren't the only ones thrilled to work with horses—adults are benefitting, too**

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**H**umans have relied on horses throughout history—for carrying men into battle, pulling plows and racing after game on the hunt. But people are now relying on horses for a different kind of strength. Three local programs are using therapeutic horsemanship programs to help adults in creative ways, to gain tangible benefits like improved physical strength, and intangible ones, like increased confidence.

David Buckley, 43, is a great example. He'd been in the Army, serving in Iraq during Desert Storm, and came home with (then undiagnosed) post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). For years he struggled with survivor guilt and has tattoos covering his arms in memory of his fallen friends.

"It was catching up with me. I was losing jobs, I was angry and depressed. I drank too much and abused pills," he says.

Two years ago, he was desperately searching for something to give him peace and discovered Lonesome Dove Equestrian Center in Powhatan, just

David Buckley, a U.S. Army veteran, rides at Lonesome Dove Equestrian Center in Powhatan. PHOTO BY ED IP

Professionals completing the substance abuse program at The Farley Center at Williamsburg Place go to Dream Catchers for therapy. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE FARLEY CENTER

Ivy Kennedy, 33, rides therapy horse Levi. PHOTO COURTESY OF EQUI-KIDS

outside of Richmond. He heard about the program through the Veteran's Administration at Hunter Holmes McGuire VA Medical Center. It's worked wonders for him. "I wouldn't be here. I would've given up. Lonesome Dove saved my life," Buckley says.

"When I'm on a horse, I forget my PTSD. Unfortunately, I just can't figure out how to stay on a horse 24/7," he says wryly. "My hardest battle was when I got home, and me worrying about judgment from others." Buckley shares a coin that he carries with him that says "PTSD—Not All Wounds Are Visible."

Today, Buckley is a role model for other veterans and even competes in local riding competitions.

Clint Arrington, the founder of Lonesome Dove, works hard to keep the program free to veterans, and clearly feels a sense of community with them. He says that some can't ride very long, but "once people get on a horse, they just want to keep going."

Grenay Williams, a kinesiotherapist at McGuire Medical Center, sees the benefits of therapeutic horseback riding for her patients.

"They've got mobility goals to accomplish, but it also helps core strengthening and it's a confidence builder," she says. For veterans with physical issues, the horse can help them develop balance. That's true for Teresa Tsu, 46, who had a stroke that affected her right side. Tsu says after just three sessions on the horse, she can see a difference in her body. "It moves muscles I don't use normally move. It works all of it and I can't favor a side," she says.

The tangible benefits of therapeutic horseback riding are increased flexibility and range of motion. But many of the intangible ones are concepts like trust and control. Buckley, for example, says he finds peace on the back of a horse.

For other adults with disabilities, like Ivy Kennedy, 33, who rides at EQUI-KIDS Therapeutic Riding Program in Virginia Beach, horseback riding keeps them active.

"There are not a lot of opportunities to participate, so anything that pops up, I do it!" Kennedy says. As a disability rights advocate, she's always looking for more ways to engage the world and Levi, a calm and steady quarter horse cross, helps her do that.

Kennedy deals with muscle tightness from her cerebral palsy, and she uses therapeutic horseback riding, in addition to aqua therapy, to help her often-contracted muscles.

*“Once people get on a horse, they just want to keep going.”*

—CLINT ARRINGTON,  
FOUNDER OF LONESOME DOVE  
EQUESTRIAN CENTER IN POWHATAN

"I get stretched out and normally wouldn't get that range of motion," she says. It also gets her out of her wheelchair, which sits empty on the ramp during horseback riding time. Besides physical and social benefits, Kennedy says there's even more in it for her.

"It calms me down inside my head. I think it's good for anyone who wants to lower their anxiety. I think of it as therapy for my muscles and my mind," she says.

As Kennedy rides, she is accompanied by two "sidewalkers," people who spot riders, and they help her get the most of the experience by stopping occasionally to