

## Six-Part Blog Series: Mental Health & Horses

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One of our mottos here at Aunt Bertha is a quote by Margaret Mead:

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

In that spirit and in honor of the New Year, we’re highlighting six of our direct service providers’ powerful missions and showcasing how they were there for their communities in 2017. These are the people whose work fuels ours, and we hope their stories inspire you as we begin 2018 with this special series.

“Most people don’t realize that horses are effective therapy animals beyond therapeutic riding, and are not aware of the vast differences between therapeutic riding and equine assisted psychotherapy.” —Emily Williams, Project Horse Empowerment Center (Purcellville, VA)





Project Horse Empowerment Center connects people in need of renewed hope and confidence with rehabilitated rescue horses, through innovative experiential learning programs and therapy services. The organization is dedicated to improving the quality of life for both horses and humans, creating a unique community of mutual healing and benefit.

It all started with a rescue horse named Reeses. Reeses used to be a competitive athlete but her career ended with a dangerous fall. For reasons unknown to Project Horse, Reeses did not receive proper medical care and rehabilitation, leaving her physically disabled and no longer able to be ridden. Reeses was then sent to a breeding farm to be a broodmare, but when that didn't produce results, she was deemed useless, turned out into a field, and forgotten.

Reeses was frightened and in very poor condition when the organization's founder and Executive Director, Darcy Woessner, stumbled upon her. Reeses was not in sale condition and would never again be a riding horse, which left her in a dangerous situation. Woessner simply could not leave the horse there, so she purchased Reeses for a small price and began the slow rehabilitation process.

Reeses soon revealed an extraordinary ability to connect deeply with others, especially children and women. It quickly became apparent that, although Reeses could no longer be ridden, she had so much to offer through her quiet wisdom and nurturing support. Since no other programs existed where non-rideable horses could share their skills to help people, Reeses and Darcy founded Project Horse — a place where non-riding horses and humans needing support partner to find hope and mutual healing.

Over the past decade, Reeses and her herd have rescued, supported, and helped over 1,000 individuals of all ages and a wide variety of challenges.

"We recently moved to a new location that is more accessible, so we have been expanding our programming to include groups for veterans, the elderly, programs through Loudoun County Parks and Recreation, as well as servicing a growing number of individual therapy clients," according to Williams.



A highlight for the organization in 2017? Being only one of eighteen nonprofits in the United States to receive a grant from VetsAid Foundation. With the grant from VetsAid and a matching corporate sponsorship from Lockheed Martin, Project Horse was able to launch their Warrior Herd™ initiative.

Warrior Herd™ is a free monthly program that focuses on strengthening connections between veterans and their families and enhancing resiliency. Warrior Herd™ offers workshops for couples, individuals, and families. During the summer of 2018, Project Horse will host a Warrior Herd™ Family Day for all members of the military (active, inactive, veterans, reservists) and their families. They will also host a week-long summer camp for children who have lost a parent in combat.

Project Horse has seen demand for individual therapy services nearly double this past year.

#### How You Can Help

- Support efforts with a financial donation
- [Sponsor a horse](#)
- [Volunteer](#)
- Spread the word and make referrals (especially to veterans)

*By Emily Storozuk, Community Engagement Manager*