

# Horsepower for healing

HOW A NONPROFIT HAS CHANGED LIVES THROUGH EQUINE THERAPY

STORY BY SHEILA PAZ



**TRIED AND TRUE** Heroes on Horseback has eight horses that assist with therapy. Most are quarter horses, ranging in age from 15 to 20 years old. Their oldest horse is 30, now retired at Lawton Stables in Sea Pines. Each therapy horse undergoes a simulation of various scenarios they may encounter before officially joining the program.



## A unique approach

Founded in 2000 by two equestrians who believed in the healing power of horses, Heroes on Horseback has grown to serve special-education students in Beaufort and Jasper counties, along with disabled military members and emergency responders. Each program is tailored to the individual. Caregivers, teachers, families and doctors are consulted to determine each participant's needs.

"We don't serve anybody who is not considered special needs," Lee said. "Everybody has to bring us some medical certification of what the challenge is so that we can structure a program that addresses those measurable objectives."

The soft crunch of hooves on gravel, the warm breath of a horse against your hand and the gentle nudge of a curious muzzle — these quiet moments are part of the magic happening at Heroes on Horseback. For more than 20 years this local nonprofit has used equine therapy to help children with autism, veterans battling PTSD and people facing emotional and physical challenges. By connecting with horses, participants build confidence, improve communication and find calm in ways that traditional methods often struggle to provide. We spoke with Bob Lee, executive director of Heroes on Horseback, to learn more about the impact of this unique therapy.

## Equine therapy

For centuries horses have been trusted companions everywhere from battlefields to farmlands. Their sensitivity to human emotions makes them ideal for equine therapy, where participants build trust and emotional awareness through connection.

Equine therapy promotes physical, emotional and mental well-being. Horses naturally sense anxiety, fear or calmness and respond in ways that help individuals gain confidence, improve communication and develop better emotional control. As herd animals, horses rely on clear verbal and nonverbal cues, making them especially attuned to those with mental or physical disabilities. This natural connection is something Heroes on Horseback strives to achieve with every participant.

**GOLD STANDARD** Heroes on Horseback is a member of the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship (PATH), a global organization that supports equine therapy centers through programming, volunteer training and instructor certification. Heroes on Horseback holds PATH's premier accreditation — the highest level of membership recognition.



## FLEXIBLE FREEDOM

The veteran program is less structured than the children's six-week program, offering flexible ground and horseback lessons to accommodate veterans' varying schedules and personal needs.



### A PLACE TO HEAL

Heroes on Horseback operates on 20 acres owned by Lawton Stables at 95 Stillwell Road in Bluffton. In exchange for maintaining the land and caring for horses boarded there, Heroes on Horseback can use the property free of charge.

### A day in the life

Programs typically run for six weeks. Most participants are students who are divided into three groups: one rides on horseback, one performs groundwork with horses, and one participates in equine-inspired art. Each group rotates every hour during the three-hour session.

In the riding arena children learn to maneuver a horse through tasks such as starting and stopping, backing up and weaving through cones. A certified instructor provides guidance, while a horse leader and two side walkers help as needed.

"Sometimes they get a little help from a horse leader, but they are the ones pulling the reins or pushing their knees to control the horse," Lee said. "That success builds confidence and, for those with physical issues, helps build core strength and improves posture."

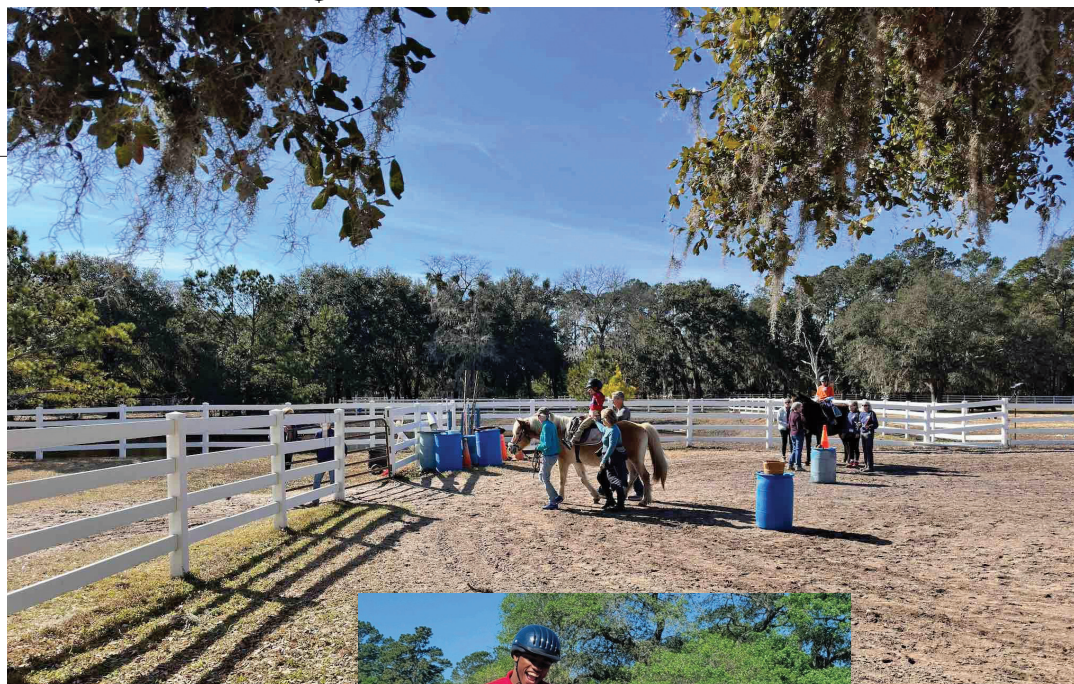
Groundwork focuses on "horse knowledge," where participants learn how to connect with, care for and communicate with their horse. This knowledge helps them become better equestrians and more comfortable around the animals.

One of the first groundwork lessons involves Rosie, a wooden horse that introduces children to the basics.

"A lot of the kids are scared at first. They'll be screaming that they don't want to get on the horse, but after 45 minutes of riding, they don't want to get off," Lee said.

Equine art allows participants to engage in creative expression while reinforcing listening and communication skills. Originally designed specifically for children with disabilities by an instructor from the Arts Center of Coastal Carolina, the program provides therapeutic value beyond traditional art classes.

"A lot of the time you want comprehension, listening and verbal and physical feedback. That can be accomplished through art," Lee said.



### SMALL BUT MIGHTY

Ponies assist with grooming lessons, offering children a hands-on opportunity to learn horse care. Their smaller size makes them ideal for younger participants, adding both practicality and fun to the activity.

### Great success

The impact of equine therapy can be life-changing. Many children arrive at Heroes on Horseback with low self-esteem, and some are nonverbal. After just a few sessions, families often see remarkable progress.

"I had a mother say to me, 'You don't know what it means to hear your name when you've never been called Mom before,'" Lee said.

Heroes on Horseback has also helped train Special Olympics equestrians, as they are the only certified Special Olympics equestrian program in the area. In 2010 two local athletes competed in the World Games in Athens, Greece, medaling in all six events they entered. Another participant went on to medal in one of three events at the 2015 World Games in Los Angeles.

For veterans and emergency responders, the program has proven equally powerful. Many face depression and anxiety, yet they often find a sense of peace that follows them home after each session.

"We're not therapists; we're equine people who use a therapeutic program to help," Lee said.

The stories shared at Heroes on Horseback demonstrate the healing power of horses and the impact they can have on those seeking hope and confidence. If you are interested in being a part of its mission — whether you'd like to volunteer or donate — visit [heroesonhorseback.org](http://heroesonhorseback.org) to learn more. LL



### CHAMPIONS IN THE SADDLE

Heroes on Horseback is home to several Special Olympians who receive certified training in preparation for competition.