

# 'Healing Heroes Through Horses'

## **A VFW member and Gulf War veteran in Virginia has created a way for veterans and first responders to receive equine therapy**

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For many veterans, equine therapy has been a way to cope with symptoms of post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injuries. Those veterans form a special bond and relief from working with horses that possibly no other animal can provide.

At New Freedom Farm, located in Buchanan, Virginia, organizers take it a step further by saving horses that are a part of the therapy.

New Freedom Farm Founder and Director Lois Dawn Fritz said her mission is to provide a refuge for horses and therapy for veterans and first responders.

A veteran of 1991's Persian Gulf War, Fritz said veterans and first responders can visit the farm any time it is open. She added that no appointment is needed for attendance.

### **A SAFE HAVEN FOR HORSES**

Founded in 2016, New Freedom Farm, according to Fritz, exists to aid veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder, TBIs and substance abuse through activity with the farm's horses, as well as farming and peer-to-peer support.

"The end goal is to personally empower veterans and help them heal through the realization of their own efforts and contributions," said Fritz, a former Navy corpsman. "Our slogan is 'Healing Heroes Through Horses.' At New Freedom Farm, veterans and horses help each other."

New Freedom Farm, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, also serves as a place for the rehabilitation of neglected horses, with many at risk of being slaughtered. Fritz, a member of VFW Post 5895 in Buchanan, Virginia, said the farm provides shelter and serves as a "foster home" for those horses.

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“Unfortunately, in our country, horses are often sent to slaughter,” Fritz said. “Those mustangs have been through so much trauma, just like our veterans have.”

Fritz claims that her farm is the first organization for veterans to receive accreditation from the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries. GFAS is a nonprofit dedicated to recognizing animal rescue centers with high standards and raising awareness for their work.

## **BATTLE BUDDIES**

One veteran who receives therapy at New Freedom Farm is Clint Cash. The medically retired Army veteran said he met Fritz years before he started going to New Freedom Farm on a regular basis. He has been going to the farm for more than two-and-a-half years.

“One day I decided that I wanted to go there and try it out,” Cash said. “I started going back more and more, and now it’s like a second home to me. I always enjoy going back to the farm.”

Cash was medically retired from the Army for PTSD, which he said stems from his deployment to Afghanistan.

“I was happy getting out of the military, but after I got out, I realized I missed the camaraderie,” Cash said. “I don’t miss being in the Army, but I really miss the brotherhood I had with my fellow soldiers.”

Cash — who deployed from June 2009 to June 2010 to Spin Boldak, Afghanistan, with 8th Squadron, 1st Cav Regt., 5th Bde., 2nd Inf. Div. — said the first few times he visited the farm, he got to know Andrew Kintgen, the barn manager at New Freedom Farm.

Cash said he has a lot in common with Kintgen, an Iraq War veteran and a member of Post 5895.

“We started talking one day and found out that both of us were born on the same day,” Cash said. “We were both Army cavalry scouts and were medically retired as sergeants. We became pretty close after that.”

A Virginia native, Cash said one of the reasons he likes going back to New Freedom Farm is that sense of camaraderie he receives while taking care of horses and visiting the farm.

“The reason veterans need other veterans and their camaraderie is because veterans need to find other people like them, who have been through the same situations,” Cash said. “We know we can rely on each other more than we can rely on others.”

Cash added, saying that it has been a relief to be able to be around others who have the same mindset as him.

## **REHABILITATING HORSES**

Cash, who served in the Army from January 2009 to November 2013, said that during his time at New Freedom Farm, he has worked with two horses, Eli and Cole.

“When Cole first came to New Freedom Farm and given to me, he did not like any humans,” Cash said. “He didn’t have any trust in people. When we first got Cole, he had a halter buried in his nose.”

Cash said that Cole’s wound has healed since then.

“Cole was just supposed to be at the farm until someone adopted him,” Cash said. “After a while, Cole started taking a liking to me. Surprisingly, New Freedom Farm gave me the horse in January.”

Cash said that ever since then, he and Fritz have been working with Cole. Fritz worked with Cole and got the horse comfortable enough to interact with humans. Cash noticed how gentle treatment made the horse more trusting.

“[Fritz] was also able to get a halter on him and walk him around,” Cash added. “Cole has turned around and is a good horse now.”

## **‘HORSES DON’T JUDGE’**

While at the farm, Cash said he typically grooms and waters the horses. He added that he helps take care of the farm, including cleaning the horses’ stalls.

Cash said he spends a lot of his time with Cole and Eli and added that he is around them more than he is around most people.

“Sometimes if I have something I need to say out loud, but don’t really want to talk about it with anyone, I can just talk to the horses,” Cash said. “That’s why I like animals. I think that animals can feel some sort of bond with humans. They can feel that I’m having a bad day. A horse can tell if people are emotional or acting differently than normal.”

Cash said he believes veterans needing support should attempt animal therapy.

“I highly recommend that people find an animal to take care of,” Cash said. “The great thing about horses is people can say anything to them, and they will keep coming back as long as they show the horse affection. Horses don’t judge.”

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