

~ MORGAN PEOPLE ~

# HOPE, HEALING, AND THE MORGAN HORSE

*The organization War Horses for Veterans uses Morgans in a program reintegrating combat veterans into civilian life.*

By Julia Arnold

Drive just 30 minutes outside the downtown of Kansas City, and things begin to slow down. Keep driving and, in Stilwell, Kansas, you'll find something nothing short of magical going on. Morgan breeder Andy Brown's Stilwell Farm has been transformed into a haven for combat veterans. His pristine 17 acres now serve as a refuge where Morgan horses help veterans gain purpose, form relationships, and provide lasting support. By the end of a weekend on the property, visitors feel like they've gained an extended family.

Patrick Benson, a combat veteran and a professional horse trainer, teamed up

with Andy and Patricia Brown to create one of the most powerful veteran organizations you'll find in the country. As Benson says, "when Andy Brown does something, he does it big." This is really big: Welcome to War Horses for Veterans.

## THE DREAM

Benson's first career was serving as a United States soldier; he served in the Army, Infantry, non-commissioned officer (NCO), from 1998 to 2004. He fought in Kosovo in 1999 and was involved with the invasion of Iraq in 2003. After his service ended, Benson knew he needed to find a career he was passionate about to help him



**ABOVE:** Jason Klepac, U.S. Army Veteran, police officer, and War Horses volunteer atop Rifle. (photo © P. Seditt)



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**THIS PAGE (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT):** Co-founders Andy Brown and Patrick Benson with a Morgan horse; Andy Brown shares a kiss with his Welfey; The War Horses for Veterans logo on the gate at the ranch.

reintegrate into civilian life. While wrapping up a mission in Fallujah, he wrote a letter to internationally-known horse trainer John Lyons. “I wanted to get into horses. I love teaching and new challenges,” Benson says. Lyons wrote back, and in April 2004, Benson started a program to earn his John Lyons certification. His training career took off from there. “I went at it and did well in the clinics. I competed a lot and got exposed to the reining world and a lot of dressage and show jumping; I bought investment horses and would train them and sell them.” Being an active horse trainer not only enabled Benson to provide for his wife and two young children, but it also gave him that crucial sense of purpose so many veterans lack when they enter civilian life. As a horse trainer, Benson had settled into his new identity. But he didn’t stop there.

Eight years into his equestrian success, the veteran began having vivid flashbacks of his time serving abroad and found himself needing to connect with veterans who shared similar experiences.

He wanted to acknowledge the difficulties of reintegrating and realized it was his horse experience that was keeping him afloat: “What I was doing for a living was saving my butt. It was therapy, but it also gave me the adrenaline rush I needed.”

When a Vietnam veteran watched him training one day and told him, “You’re fixing all those horses, but what you don’t realize is they’re fixing you,” Benson’s dream of starting an equine-based nonprofit for veterans began to take shape, not that he thought it would come to fruition anytime soon.

Benson was training horses for the no-nonsense, charismatic Andy Brown at the time, and one night over a bottle of Jameson, Benson shared his ambitious goal. Brown had been itching to find a way to help people and had always seen horses as a source of therapy in his own life—he loved the idea. He and his wife Patricia immediately encouraged Benson’s plan. Brown looked at this young horse trainer and said, “get it started. We’ll pay for it.” They





**LEFT TO RIGHT:** Veteran Kristen Jensen shares a moment during a grooming session; U.S. Army veterans Eric Audritsh and Brandon Blake reminisce about deployments during a War Horses weekend.

have since become Benson's mentors and a second family.

Andy Brown, whose Kansas City roots are as deep as the black walnut trees that line his property, grew up fox hunting on other breeds, but turned to Morgans when he met a special one (and the only one) he still rides today, Woodgate Wellfleet "Welfie." Upon meeting Benson, Andy found the perfect horse trainer and the perfect match to run one of the best veteran programs in the country. The two men began to develop their mission—to create an experience for combat vets to come, feel better, connect with horses, and leave with opportunities and support.

Brown admits, "Patrick and I, we both had a need to help others, and horses have been both of our saviors." Their love for horses, along with their relationship and mutual respect, is the basis for the entire program, and the positivity and support between the two radiates to everyone who enters the property.

### "YOU'RE WITH YOUR OWN"

The mission of War Horses for Veterans is to provide combat veterans with the opportunity to learn the basics of horsemanship while building lasting partnerships with other veterans from across the country. Benson hopes the program gives vets personal and professional opportunities that he didn't have when he was transitioning to civilian life. "It is drastic going from combat to being a civilian, and there's an ungodly amount of soldiers who get out and don't have support, so we provide that family environment." One sobering statistic: approximately 20 veterans a day commit suicide (according to Department of Veterans Affairs). Benson and Brown knew they could help make a dent in that tragic loss. Benson says, "we help veterans find the confidence, motivation, and purpose they once had to inspire them to become leaders in their lives, communities, and relationships."

As a result of Benson and Brown's teamwork and dedication, along with the support of a small staff and many volunteers, the

organization, now in its fourth year, has helped dozens of veterans reintegrate with confidence and motivation lasting long after a weekend at a picturesque horse farm. Several vets have even relocated to the Kansas City area after completing the program and continue to return as mentors.

As the visiting veterans arrive at the Kansas City airport on a Friday afternoon, the welcoming begins. The staff and volunteers are fully aware that everyone who participates in the program is stepping out of their comfort zones—flying alone to a new place where they know no one and often know nothing about horses. Incredibly, walls begin to come down as soon as the drive to the hotel starts; the vets quickly make connections with each other, having shared unspoken similar experiences in combat. As soon as the group arrives at the Browns' farm Friday evening for a full spread of local food, the War Horses team provides a steady stream of positivity and non-judgmental emotional support.

Army veteran Kristen Jensen, who served from 2000-2012, says the welcoming atmosphere was a highlight of her experience there: "For once there were no judgments, no looking at me as if I was broken or weird or that there was something wrong with me inside. I was truly just accepted for who I was."

The beautiful, highly trained horses at the farm are another integral part of the program. They serve as a powerful living bridge connecting these veterans to civilian life, to each other, and to the feeling that they have purpose and support. Benson tells newcomers, "I promise when you get out here it will change the way you feel." And while there is no doubt that spending time with horses is therapeutic, the program also naturally incorporates networking opportunities to serve veterans after their weekend stay ends.

The fact that many of the staff and volunteers are combat veterans helps the guests feel right at home. "You are with your own," Benson explains. He teaches them a trade—training



**LEFT TO RIGHT:** Gary is a vet who now volunteers at the program and is learning how to be a horse trainer from Benson; Equine assisted life coach talked with visiting vet Oscar during a grooming session. As Benson says, “a lot gets done in a short amount of time here;” Flag in barn that all visitors sign.

horses— but in doing so, “they’re building confidence. It’s not like any other equine therapy. You are teaching them on high-quality horses, Andy’s Morgans, so the veterans don’t feel limited.” In addition, he says, the men and ladies “find peace. And they focus. All the anxiety goes away. Then they find out how do you apply that to everyday life.”

### “I’M NOT BROKEN”

The veterans don’t just listen to a clinic the whole weekend: “We do it by doing. Not by yapping their ears off, and it’s very effective,” Patrick says. “The beauty of it is the horses are such an ice breaker. It all starts with the horse.” He is true to his word. On Saturday morning, everyone comes together to start the work, beginning with pitching in to assemble the round pens. Next, the vets begin learning basic horsemanship like catching and grooming, and then quickly move on to groundwork and bridle work. After lunch (another impressive spread, often donated by local restaurants), many guests are up in the saddle learning to stay balanced and use reins and leg cues, all while establishing a connection with the horse. Veterans can take their equestrian study as far as they want. Benson lets the day develop organically. Some veterans choose to stay walking with a horse, and others may work up to jumping—all in a matter of a single weekend. This is impressive, considering that over 90 percent of vets come without ever having worked with horses.

Jensen found so much joy in riding during her stay that she didn’t want her time with the horses to end. She says, “riding with Patrick and learning from him was a favorite part of the program. I literally was told to get off the horse Sunday and go eat before we had to leave for the airport. I did not want to stop.” Nothing could make Benson happier.

The staff firmly believes horses are the ideal ice breaker to

help connections develop, walls come down, anxieties wash away. “Grooming,” Benson notes, “that’s when they start talking. Walls begin to come down with the horses as a buffer, and a community begins developing. They then work on basic turns, teaching the horse to come to you, then bridle work. By then the saddle comes naturally. By the time they get in the saddle, they’ve already learned how to communicate with the horse. By the time they’re riding, they’re feeling relaxed and confident. When you have control you can do more.”

That feeling of connection and community goes beyond the saddle. Jensen says the staff as a whole, “were that port in the storm for me. The feeling I left with Sunday was that I was happy, at peace, and that even though I’m not 100 percent where I want to be, I’m going to get better. I’m not broken.”

### THE NOBLE MORGAN

The Morgan breed has a noble history of serving our country dating back to the Civil War when they carried soldiers on the battlefield. Benson and Brown think the Morgan’s loyalty, intelligence, and sensitivity are a perfect match for this program. Benson says, “they’re a loyal breed. They’re not deadheads. They’re not passive horses. They’re intelligent and athletic...and Andy’s lines are incredibly durable.” The horses offer a diverse riding experience, from Western to dressage, depending on the rider’s interests. Brown adds that for these vets, it’s “better to have a Morgan than any other horse—they offer the best relationships. I have never had a horse I can connect with like a Morgan.”

Riding such sensitive horses, Patrick explains, “is a really good mirror. That horse will let you know how you are feeling. What I like about them is that the moment you sync with that horse, it’s a pretty neat thing to watch. It’s a spirited horse, and if you can relax a spirited horse, you’re getting that connection.”



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**LEFT TO RIGHT:** Volunteers and vets working together to catch the horses for the day; Pat Brown and the new baby. Pat is very welcoming and involved in every veteran weekend visit.

Staff member Kelley Slagle incorporates life coaching work throughout the weekend and demonstrates how horses can communicate what's really going on inside us. "You can't hide from these Morgans," she notes. It's truly breathtaking to watch a veteran in the round pen with a horse, and witness the horse calmly walk over to comfort someone as Slagle helps them work through powerful emotions. Things get real, real fast in the round pen, and the atmosphere is filled with human and equine support.

Slagle's work is remarkably effective considering the limited amount of time she has in the round pen with each vet. For Army veteran Douglas Hebbard, his session with her was life-changing: "The equine assisted therapy session in the round pen with Kelley and Dualcheck [the horse] was my favorite part. I was amazed at how Dualcheck could sense the good in me...he helped me find the happy, good person I locked away inside because I couldn't forgive myself for people I've lost or taken from this world through my past."

Benson adds that spending time with the horses, "teaches [veterans] to be calm and quiet, and slow down and relax"—skills integral for reintegrating into civilian life, spending time with family, and often beginning an entirely new career path. "A lot gets done in a short amount of time."

### A LIFELONG CONNECTION

Benson and his staff are determined to offer every graduate something beyond the enjoyment of a weekend at the farm: "They have a family to come back to," he says. His family helps out too. Benson's mom can often be found cooking a big breakfast on Sunday before the group heads out fishing or riding.

Brown's wife, Patricia, and Benson's wife, Mindy, are also central to the program's success. They do much of the administrative and behind the scenes work. Benson says Pat Brown is the "mother of the group. These veterans get to experience the loving compassion that I get to experience on a regular basis with the Browns...She opens her home and her heart to the veterans and from then on, they are a part of her family and she talks with a lot of them on a regular basis via phone or Facebook. She gives 200 percent of herself to the program and the veterans." Pat Brown greets veterans

with a big smile from the moment they step foot on the property and remains present throughout the weekend, offering anecdotes, laughs, and sincere friendship.

The welcoming feeling doesn't stop when the weekend comes to a close. Veteran and first responder, Gary Graniewski, participated in the program and now volunteers whenever he can. He was in a dark place in his life when he first met Benson and Director of Development and Navy Combat Photographer veteran, John Parker, but his life forever changed after being welcomed into the War Horses family, all with a simple text from Benson that read "You're family now, Brother."

"From that moment on," Graniewski says, "I was all in." Benson is currently mentoring the first responder to become a horse trainer so when he retires from law enforcement, he will have that skill set to continue to make a living. Graniewski adds, "I used to tell people they saved my life, but recently I've changed that after reflecting on it; now I tell people they showed me how to save my own life."

### WORTH EVERY PENNY

The program costs nothing to the combat veterans who apply. The staff arranges everything from the airline flights to comfortable lodging at the local Doubletree hotel. It is an expensive operation for the foundation, however, which takes zero government funding. Benson says, "it's an expensive program but worth every penny." Pat and Andy Brown have donated all of their land to the program and began the foundation to support the program in the long term. Brown says, "our goal is through the foundation to support what we are doing and grow so we can fit more people."

War Horses for Veterans has received national and local attention, including a television interview with NBC news reporter, Megyn Kelly. The Home Depot announced a large donation during that interview which will enable the foundation to build a large indoor arena this winter, so the work can continue no matter the weather. They also rely on individual and small business donations, fundraising events, and proceeds from merchandise sales. Kansas City folks love to eat, and their local restaurants step up to



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contribute many of the meals, including authentic Kansas City barbecue.

### STILWELL MORGANS: "THE WHOLE PACKAGE"

Brown's ALB Morgans are primarily performance horses. He is introducing them to the public by giving them to highly competitive riders, "so they can go out and get the name going." He also loves a good reining horse, which he believes he has in his Morgans Enfield Rifle and Stilwell Volt. Brown admits, "I always felt like at the end of the day, I needed horses to get me a feeling of equanimity and balance. I needed a horse who could do that. Morgans fit the bill."

What first sold him on Morgans was the one he still rides today, Welfie. "After I met this Morgan 16 years ago, I won't ride any other horse. There's just something in Welfie's eye that attracted me." After college and graduate school (he attended Princeton University and the University of Chicago Business School), Brown decided fox hunting wasn't for him. That's when he switched over to Morgans. "Once I got

close to my first Morgan, I thought 'there's something about this horse.' What I went on to find about the Morgan horse is that they have an overall different character. They're friendly...I've always used horses for my own therapy, and that first Morgan endeared me to the breed."

Eventually, UVM Springfield caught Brown's eye: "he's the whole package and now all my horses have some of UVM Springfield's blood in them" He has two reining world champions in "Volt" and "Rifle" and says, "I know without a doubt Volt is a top Western horse. There's nothing he can't do." His stallion, Volt, is imposing and impressive before you know any of his aristocratic bloodlines, sporting an intelligent eye and a long, thick black mane any mare would envy. Yet even as a stallion, he, like all of the ASB Morgans, is so friendly he happily sticks his muzzle out of his stall or over the pasture fence to greet visitors.

Brown attributes his lifelong karate practice to training his eye to study how a horse moves. "Having practiced karate my whole life, there is form in power and power

in form. What I look for personally is the way the horse uses his body so that his movements allow for a good capability as far as him getting into his various leads. I look for a good head too, and smart, easy to train... I like a stallion who will eat out of your hand." His stallion does just that, as Brown frequently visits the horses with a handful of carrots.

### "THEY HAVE A HOME"

The Browns plan to support the program indefinitely. "This is my calling," Andy Brown says, "because I love horses and I love what they do for people. I am not a good rider—I'm a great faller." So, teaming up with local horse whisperer Benson serves as the perfect complement as they move forward and grow to serve as many veterans as possible. "With Patrick," Brown explains "we feel we have someone who can take this where it needs to go. Ours is truly an altruistic program to enrich the people who come here. When people leave us, we want them to stay connected. What we do—our number one priority—we want connection."

Veteran Oscar Rodriguez, who served in the Army from 2009-2012 and in the Army National Guard from 2012-2017, says his overall feeling after leaving the weekend program "was that I finally felt at peace with myself and was able to smile naturally without being forced to smile. The biggest takeaway for me was to feel confident with myself and have confidence in my abilities again." Rodriguez's renewed sense of confidence is exactly the sort of motivating result everyone at War Horses wants for their program graduates.

Despite the emotionally, financially, and physically taxing work such an intensive non-profit program requires, Benson says it is all worth it "when I see veterans take on new opportunities. It brings so much joy and happiness to me." He, Brown, the mentors and staff, and the Morgan horses are giving back to those who have given all of us so much in the name of freedom. As Brown says, "our vets come in and by the time they leave, they have a connection. They can always come back by bringing a new vet with them. They have a home." ■

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## FIRST PERSON EXPERIENCE: A WRITER VISITS “WAR HORSES FOR VETERANS”

By Julia Arnold

Watching horse trainer and War Horses for Veterans co-founder Patrick Benson work a horse in the round pen is something out of a Hollywood movie. As he demonstrated the art of working with Enfield Rifle (“Rifle”), a Stilwell Morgan, in the round pen, he needed no lunge line and no whip. I didn’t even see him make physical contact with the horse unless it was to offer praise. Rifle was directed through body stance, quiet whistles, and eye contact. It’s obvious working with horses is something as natural as breathing to the combat veteran. His love and respect for the animal permeates the round pen and the entire farm.

Just as I was coming out of my trance, Benson stepped out of the ring and informed the veterans and me it was our turn to go in. “To follow that? You must be joking,” I thought. No, he was totally serious. Each visitor is asked to enter the round pen and try some of Benson’s ground exercises—the goal being to establish connection before getting in a saddle. Fortunately, when it was my turn, I had the help of visiting veteran Doug Hebbard, who had far more confidence in the round pen than I did. He helped me get a feel for how to use my body language to connect with the horse. We asked Rifle to turn, to speed up, and to slow down and calmly walk over for praise, all without a lunge line. To

establish connection with the horse before even getting on is a tool all riders can use, and it was one I won’t forget.

Earlier that morning, I happened to let it slip to Benson that trying some Morgan dressage work was a goal of mine. I certainly wasn’t expecting to attempt it anytime soon, especially that day. But before I knew it, Benson was uncovering a shiny black custom dressage saddle and telling me to get Stilwell Summer tacked up. I’d be riding him and doing some one-on-one work.

“Really? But I’ve never ridden dressage and there are all these people watching,” I thought. The trainer clearly doesn’t believe in letting fear of failure stop us, so I took a deep breath and followed orders.

There are a lot of eyes on you there, similar to riding in the show ring, and as someone who isn’t comfortable showing, surely I would experience that stomach-in-knots feeling when I was with “Summer.” But like everything that weekend, stepping out of my comfort zone was worth it. The community there offered nothing

but support. Benson patiently taught me how to relax Summer into that trademark softly-curved dressage neck and get the horse’s mouth soft in the bridle. I was far from perfect at the exercise, but I learned a lot in roughly 10 minutes. By the time Benson was asking me to trot—and drop the reins!—I felt enough trust in him and the horse that I did just that.

As I looked around the arena, getting used to my new mount, I felt honored to be riding along with the veterans who were visiting with me that weekend. Watching veteran Kristen Jensen confidently canter around the arena, and veterans Doug Hebbard and Oscar Rodriguez have a blast together, was a total joy. The mentors and staff are all right there, ready to offer as much assistance as you

need or as much space as you want. There’s a mutual trust there.

Riding the beautiful Morgans and exploring the Browns’ farm with new friends are experiences I’ll never forget, but my overarching takeaway from my time in Stilwell, Kansas, is that in supporting War Horses for Veterans, you are supporting something much bigger than yourself. Everyone who participates—as a guest, volunteer, or staff member—has the opportunity to be a part of a community that remains long after leaving the farm. That community, along with the underlying



Julia with Andy and Pat.

reminder that stepping out of our comfort zones is always worth it and, I believe, the only way we grow, are gifts I’ll keep close to my heart.

I’ll be forever grateful for the chance to spend time at Patricia and Andy’s Brown’s farmhouse. What a fun, welcoming couple they are. I also want to thank the staff for their guidance and friendship during my visit, especially Patrick Benson, Navy veteran, photographer, and Director of Development John Parker, police officer and veteran Gary Graniewski, equine assisted life coach Kelley Slagle, and many more. I’m especially touched by the four veterans who were visiting with me that weekend; they were total troopers ignoring the writer in me scratching away at her little notebook and constantly snapping pictures, while also including me as a part of their team: Kristen Jensen, Doug Hebbard, Erica Thompson, and Oscar Rodriguez. I plan to continue to support War Horses for Veterans because of the profound impact all of you had on me. ■