



# Zweig

From the Harry M. Zweig  
Memorial Fund for Equine  
Research at the Cornell University  
College of Veterinary Medicine



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## Healing with horses

By Olivia Hall

When Teagan Manning first began working with Hero, she felt an immediate kinship with the horse — a five-year-old mustang gelding who was still unused to being handled. The veteran recognized the same kind of exhausting stress, anxiety and hypervigilance that had been plaguing her ever since a severe training accident had cut short a 14-year career with the United States Marine Corps. “I realized that if I was going to help Hero, I was going to have to find this calm centeredness within myself, in order to help him learn and achieve the things that he needs to achieve,” Manning said. “And that calm centeredness I haven’t felt in years.”

The pair continued to train together under the auspices



*Mission Mustang© brings captive mustangs together with veterans burdened with the emotional and physical scars of war.*

*Photo: EquiCenter*

of Mission Mustang©, one of a diverse array of programs serving individuals with disabilities, at-risk youth, veterans and their families at EquiCenter in Honeoye Falls, New York. Housed at the 200-acre William and Mildred Levine Ranch, the nonprofit is a Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International Premier Accredited Center and offers therapeutic equestrian and related activities, including horseback riding and horsemanship, adaptive yoga, canine-assisted activities and farm-to-culinary classes. In 2018, in collaboration with Cornell Cooperative Extension and the Canandaigua VA Medical Center, EquiCenter secured an \$850,000 contract from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs’ Office of Rural Mental Health to teach therapeutic horticulture and farming to veterans on its three-acre organic farm.

When Manning joined Mission Mustang©, it was a pilot program between EquiCenter and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to bring captive mustangs together with veterans burdened with the emotional and physical scars of war. “Veterans are really given a purpose,” said Jonathan Friedlander, EquiCenter’s CEO and co-founder with his wife Stacy, who is an accomplished equestrian. The purpose: Gentle mustangs and prepare them for a new home.

The first four horses arrived at EquiCenter from Wyoming in 2018, joined later by six others purchased at a BLM auction at Cornell’s Oxley Equestrian Center. All come from among some 50,000 wild mustangs and burros held by the BLM in off-range corrals and pastures to ease pressure off the nearly 100,000 free mustangs that crowd into 10 western states with insufficient space to roam and thrive. Being separated from their herd and brought into captivity only heightens the mustangs’ natural self-protective instincts as prey animals. “The hypervigilance and anxiety and the desire to fit back in really mirror what many veterans with post-traumatic stress are experiencing,” Friedlander explained. “They feel a sense of

common struggle and connection to the mustangs.”

As the veterans learn — step-by-step and under the guidance of such experts as lead mustang trainer Steve Stevens — how to handle the wild animals, they themselves begin to change. “To watch the veteran have to dig deeply into his or herself, to be quiet, to be able to gentle the mustangs is a really powerful thing to see,” said Pat Wehle, a retired standardbred breeder and Zweig committee member, who serves as an informal advisor to EquiCenter. Ann Dwyer, D.V.M. '83, also a Zweig committee member and EquiCenter advisor, is another shared connection.

A veteran named Mike no longer harbors thoughts of suicide, Friedlander reports, and another stopped wishing he'd died in Afghanistan. Manning has regained confidence and focus that extend into life outside the ring. In a letter to the future owners of Liberty, one of 10 mustangs who have been adopted to date, participant Brett Avery wrote, “I'm sure I could speak for everyone who worked with her when I say that she was the light and guidance we needed. We as veterans went to Mission Mustang© to save these horses, but in actuality they saved us!”

Having lost three military friends to suicide in the year after he retired from the U.S. Marine Corps, Avery hopes to bring such healing to many more of his fellow veterans. Last year he joined forces with Friedlander to organize Hoof-it for Heroes©. During the inaugural challenge, people from 19 states and six countries ran, walked, rode or otherwise covered a 2.2-mile distance — one pilot in

South Korea flew his jet 2.2 miles in 30 seconds — to call awareness to the 22 veterans and active military personnel who end their own lives every day. Funds raised support Mission Mustang©, which Friedlander intends to serve as a model and inspiration for other facilities around the country and world.

Friedlander invites anyone who wants to raise awareness for veteran and active military suicide and support Mission Mustang© to participate in this year's event — likely joined by members of Queen Elizabeth II's Household Cavalry, with whom EquiCenter has ongoing working exchanges to share best practices and programs to help wounded veterans and active military in both countries. The second annual Hoof-it for Heroes© will begin Nov. 7 and continue for 22 days. For more information, please visit: [www.equicenterny.org/hooftforheroes](http://www.equicenterny.org/hooftforheroes) •



*“[Veterans] feel a sense of common struggle and connection to the mustangs.”  
- Jonathan Friedlander, EquiCenter president and CEO. Photo: EquiCenter*



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