

The Times-Tribune

BY JON O'CONNELL, STAFF WRITER / Published: February 6, 2017

NEWTON TWP. — When he left the Marines in 2012, R.J. Lacelle never expected his battles to follow. But two years after discharge, the firefights and homemade bombs that had threatened him in Afghanistan returned. Panic attacks and anxiety turned the trained warrior into a recluse.

Now, a new twist on a psychotherapy treatment for trauma victims has given him control over his post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms. Mr. Lacelle, 27, of Mount Pocono, recently graduated from a program that uses horses and eye movement desensitization and reprocessing, or EMDR, called **Equines For Freedom**.

In 2015, licensed psychologist Ann Marie Lewis and Heather Stage, an equine specialist, started the nonprofit, leasing a tidy riding arena and horses from Marley's Mission in Newton Twp. to provide free therapy to veterans suffering from PTSD. "With EMDR, we have one foot in the past and one foot in the present, and the horse keeps that person in the present," Ms. Lewis said. "Our job with the EMDR is we want them to bond with the horse so when we get into the processing of the trauma, the horse can actually nurture them while they deal with the uglies of the past," she said

Clients don't ride the horses. The horses' presence in the room tethers clients to reality while they dig up traumatic moments in an effort to reshape the emotions tied to them. **Equines For Freedom** has 11 clients now, but with three therapist teams, they have capacity to work with about 25 people total.

Originally from Detroit, Mr. Lacelle, a Marine with 1st Battalion, 3rd Marines, Bravo Company, served two tours in Afghanistan. He deployed in 2009 and again in 2011.

During his first tour, Mr. Lacelle took part in six firefights, a number he downplays. He watched fellow Marines die, one from his unit. The sound of gunfire and erupting improvised explosive devices clacked through his days, keeping time like a deadly metronome.



*JASON FARMER / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
Marine veteran R.J. Lacelle, center, holds Hero as he gets together with Ann Marie Lewis, a licensed psychologist, left, and Heather Stage, equine specialist, in the Equines For Freedom program in Newton Twp. on Sunday.*

In the **Equines For Freedom** arena, he described the conniving Taliban militants, organized and tactful, who tried to outsmart them. "Ambushes. IEDs. They'll put guys somewhere to make you walk somewhere"

As if on cue, a horse called Hero, a black and white paint, sauntered in front of him, interrupting as if he had sensed the tension growing. His presence quickly changed the subject.

Hero, who is not Mr. Lacelle's usual therapy partner, had just demonstrated unsolicited why horses work well with PTSD sufferers. "They're a fantastic barometer for how I'm

feeling,” he said. As prey animals, horses sense anxiety, Ms. Lewis explained. If Mr. Lacelle or any other client starts to drift too far while essentially reliving a traumatic experience, the horse can sense anxiety and react, usually walking away from it.

In this case, Hero stepped right in the middle of it.

Hero wasn't the horse's real name. A Vietnam-era veteran, one who suffered PTSD for 48 years but who is set to graduate soon, picked the name, Ms. Lewis said. Each veteran chooses a nickname for his or her horse to strip identity from them. It helps to avoid coincidental associations with names that might have an unpleasant meaning in a veteran's past, Ms. Lewis said.

Mr. Lacelle nicknamed his horse Dusty, because he's a bit bullish and likes to roll and kick up sand.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs recognizes EMDR among three evidenced-based psychotherapy techniques, said Matthew Dooley, Psy.D., a staff psychologist at the Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Center in Plains Twp. “I'm very familiar with EMDR. I deliver that treatment here. It's a good treatment,” he said.

He was unfamiliar, however, with using horses during EMDR, but explained the VA considers it an alternative treatment.

At **Equines For Freedom**, new clients spend months with a therapist going through their full history, starting with their earliest memories. During that time, they get to know a horse they've chosen from the Marley's Mission stables who will work with them throughout their treatment. Months pass before the first EMDR session, but when they're ready, the therapist asks the client to revive a traumatic memory. Meanwhile, the therapist taps back and forth on the client's back. In the most common EMDR treatments, without horses, the therapist waves a hand in front of the client, causing them to look right, then left, like watching a tennis

match. The eye movement splays open those traumatic memories so the client can reset the emotions tied to them. “It doesn't take away the memory, but it just lets you remember that without the negative emotions,” Mrs. Stage said.



*JASON FARMER / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
Marine veteran R.J. Lacelle, a graduate of the
Equines For Freedom program, pets Hero in Newton
Twp. on Sunday.*

Scratching Hero's neck, Mr. Lacelle wears a sturdy, dark olive jacket and black scrub pants with a stethoscope tucked in the side pocket. He's studying to be a veterinary technician. “It's impossible to get it all positive,” he said. “But I'm focused more on the good times, I guess you could say.”

To learn more about **Equines For Freedom**, visit www.equinesforfreedom.org or call **570-665-2483**.

Equines For Freedom is provided free to any veteran suffering the symptoms of PTSD. Funding is provided by donations from individuals, foundations and corporations. See our webpage to donate. **Equines for Freedom** is a 501c(3) corporation and donations are tax deductible.