



# TREK 2020 — SEARCHING FOR OUR HEROES

## One Woman, One Horse, 2300 Miles

by Margaret “Peg” Steele, Steele Away Acres

On September 11, 2001, I got up and got dressed and headed off to work. I picked up my cell phone and dialed my dearest friend who was a NYC Fire Fighter. I wanted the name of a restaurant to which he had taken me. He couldn’t talk because he was “headed out to the Towers. Something big is going on.” Thirty minutes later I stood in a conference room with a group of co-workers as I watched the towers fall. My friend was one of the now 412 first responders killed that day. The picture of the towers falling and my own voice screaming out “Nooooo!” lives in me. I spent the next year working on moving as far away from New Jersey/New York as I could, finally settling in Georgia.

It took me almost 11 years before I realized that my behavioral changes of many were due to PTSD, and I was just a bystander. The knowing was half the battle. But it stirred something inside of me that never left, and that was the thought of the now 412 first responders who worked at ground zero for weeks and months—the military that were deployed because of this one event and the years of war we have been involved in and those returning from war and the first responders who see horrors each day.

In studying, I found that the statistics of the number of people suffering from PTSD were pretty much guesses. The military tells us that one in five returning veterans will suffer from PTSD, always with the footnote of if they report it, seek treatment, or if it is diagnosed properly. Approximately 216,000 Police Officers suffer from PTSD. I suggest that the “ifs” also apply to them.

PTSD is associated with the increased likelihood of other psychiatric disorders, such as alcohol and drug abuse and/or dependence, major depressive episodes, conduct disorders. These include problems with interpersonal relationships, problems with employment, and involvement with the criminal justice system. There are 20 suicides per day from our veteran population and 1 per day in our active military.

The number one treatment for PTSD is medication management of the symptoms. But there are many other types of treatment. Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) is one making huge strides in this area.

People who have PTSD live in a state of hyper-vigilance, feeling threatened by everyday events. Horses are prey animals, so they also live in a state of hyper-vigilance, as do those who have been to war rely on their heightened senses for survival. By interacting with horses, people with PTSD often will see their own emotional state mirrored in the reactions of the horses with which they are working. They respond positively to positive emotions, and they have no ulterior motives. The horses are just there providing non-verbal feedback. Horses also force people to come out of their comfort zones by working with large, unfamiliar animals. The confidence that people can gain from interacting



with horses can flow over into other aspects of their lives. Imagine what this can do for our heroes suffering from physical disabilities.

EAP for people with PTSD has gathered the attention of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, which has provided grants for practitioners to run equine assisted therapy groups with returning troops from Afghanistan and Iraq. Preliminary results have been favorable, suggesting statistically-significant rates of change. Many say that just one session with a horse is more effective than five sessions on a couch. Most of the programs don’t involve riding a horse. Therapy is done on the ground.

As an equestrian, I know first hand what time with horses can do. The lack of funding for these programs, public awareness of its benefits, and the inability to access qualified programs are all issues I hope to solve by spending 4 months, 12 days, 2,300 miles riding throughout the Southeastern United States. I will honor our many heroes and learn and teach about EAP along the way. We leave on February 15, 2020. With each hoof fall, we hope to help a hero. Please visit our Facebook page by searching “Trek 2020 – Searching for Our Heroes.”