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Loan Helps Equine Therapist Treat Veterans With PTSD

By Justin Hyde, Loan Officer, Accion

When Claire Ann Barr-Johnson applied for a loan with Accion in 2013 to expand marketing for her Albuquerque-based equine therapy nonprofit, her primary goal wasn't the money. She wanted the mentoring and advising that comes with being an Accion client.



Barr-Johnson's for-profit company, Clinical Solutions, generated enough revenue to provide an income. But she wanted advice about how to build Horses for Healing into her central occupation — especially in light of a new, \$50,000 contract with the state Behavioral Health Services Division to work with veterans who are struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Horse Sense

Barr-Johnson began her work in equine therapy more than a decade ago while working at an agency that treated young victims of abuse and neglect. She noticed how children who distrusted people relaxed their guard around horses.



Claire Ann Barr-Johnson, of Horses for Healing, with Phoebe, a 9-year-old Quarter Horse, who is sporting a fly mask.

A few years after starting her own clinic, she returned to the idea of working with horses during discussions with her son-in-law — an Iraq War veteran. Barr-Johnson began researching how horses could help former combatants reintegrate into civilian life.

The result was Horses for Healing, which pairs veterans with Barr-Johnson's own stable of six horses. "The exciting thing about this contract is that it provides support services for veterans and their families who have no insurance," she said.

Veterans who are hyper-vigilant about their surroundings and ultrasensitive to sounds and environmental stimulation have something in common with horses: Both are conditioned to react as prey.

“Horses can demonstrate and role-model for vets” through their own reactions to noise and perceived threats, Barr-Johnson said. Interacting with the horses and working with therapists allows the vets to imagine different ways to adjust to the world around them.

“Claire is coupling her therapeutic and psychological background with her passion for horses and their healing potential in a really meaningful way,” said Lynn Trojahn, vice president of advancement at Accion. “Claire enables her patients to be the authors of their solutions, and her horses help her in providing that special support.”

Why Accion

Accion began lending to nonprofits in 2012, and Horses for Healing was one of its first clients.

"I chose Accion to assist me with the startup of my new company because of its reputation and the creativity, support and enthusiasm of Accion staff," Barr-Johnson said. "I never even considered a traditional lender, especially for that small amount."

Accion loans can be as small as \$200 and as big as \$300,000, but the lender also offers training, networking and other support services to New Mexicans who own or want to start a business.

Barr-Johnson expects to work with Accion again. She's looking at federal grants that would allow her to expand her program's reach wherever it's needed. "We would like to reproduce this in other places," she said.

Since 1994, Accion has served entrepreneurs in 316 communities, financing the startup or expansion of 4,008 businesses through 6,257 loans totaling more than \$46.2 million. For more information about Accion, visit www.accionnm.org or call 1-800-508-7624.

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