



## HORSES for HEROES

# Student Veterans Find Stress Reliever in Horse Care

By Monica Rodriguez

**John Anthony**, a United States Marine Corps veteran, was about two hours away from a final exam, but instead of feeling anxious, the math major felt relaxed. He had spent part of the morning grooming and walking an Arabian purebred named Alada Sprite VS, or simply Sprite, through a short obstacle course at the **W.K. Kellogg Arabian Horse Center**.

Working with Sprite, a white 19-year-old mare, is calming, Anthony says. When big exams were on his schedule, he made it a priority to spend time with Sprite. "I go into each exam calm and focused," Anthony says. The Marine veteran is part of a pilot program called **Horses for Heroes**, which is based on the campus' Foal Watch program and a similar activity at UC Davis. During the fall, 10 student veterans worked in pairs along with graduate assistants to groom and care for a horse. The program also included training in equine behavior, horse handling and horse health. "It gives veterans the opportunity to focus on the present and also on their well-being," says **Elke Azpeitia**, coordinator of Cal Poly Pomona's **Veterans Resource Center**. Horses for Heroes is a partnership between the veterans center and the **Don B. Huntley College of Agriculture**. **Jamie Orozco** and **Araseli Servin** teamed up to work with CP Sophisticate, better known as Sophie, a 6-year-old Arabian mare. Orozco, 25, is a junior majoring in electronic systems engineering technology and a veteran of the Marines. Servin, 22, is a biology senior and has completed officer candidate school and will join the Marines after graduation. As they spend time brushing and feeding Sophie, the pair has gotten to know their horse and she has gotten to know them. "It's peaceful, you forget about everything," Servin says. "You're with the horse, wanting to know about it." Being around Sophie and other horses has given Orozco some insight into the animals.

"They're really emotionally connected to you," he says. "You forget about the outside world. It helps with stress. You forget about what is happening at school, at work, at home. You don't want to leave." Horses are perceptive creatures who sense the emotional state of the humans around them, according to **April Kilbourne**, student activities coordinator at the horse center. "They're like big antennas for emotion," Anthony agrees. "Whatever I am feeling, Sprite will pick up on it and reflect it back at me like a mirror." Orozco says working with Sophie has taught him to be much more aware of his emotions and state of mind. "Before I just jumped into things," he says. "With the horse, it's 'Wait, what am I feeling?'" If he's feeling anxious or stressed, he makes a conscious effort to calm down and relax. Orozco says he's also become more sensitive to the mindset of other people and will ask them how they feel. During one exercise, student veterans took the horses through a series of obstacles: a wooden platform, four wooden poles laid on the ground about 2 feet apart, and a gate-like structure made of PVC pipes, and blue and green swimming pool noodles. The obstacles represent situations a horse may encounter on a trail: a wooden bridge, objects on the ground, and bushes or tree branches that might brush against the side of the animal's body. All are things that could scare a horse, Kilbourne says.

"It teaches people how the horses think," she says. "It teaches them to slow down." It also strengthens the human-animal team. As the student veterans took turns going through the obstacle course, Anthony, 36, had a few words with Sprite. "Pay attention, this is what you're going to do in a moment," he said as he leaned toward her neck. Before creating Horses for Heroes, Cal Poly Pomona administrators looked into research results on the positive effects of riding horses on military veterans dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder and the benefits of the human-horse bond, according to **Lideth Ortega-Villalobos**, psychologist and **Counseling and Psychological Services** liaison to the Veterans Resource Center. Although Horses for Heroes is not an expressly therapeutic program for PTSD, it includes training on coping skills and elements from similar programs that have been successful. Program organizers are reviewing the data and results from Horses for Heroes, which will resume in fall 2020, Azpeitia says. They are also exploring grant options to fund the program in the future.



John Anthony with Sprite

Araseli Servin and Jamie Orozco with Sophie



 WATCH A VIDEO segment by Spectrum News on Horses for Heroes. [www.cpp.edu/cppmag](http://www.cpp.edu/cppmag)