Letter from Craig Meriwether, Former Board Member, BITS ETC. April 23, 2019

Hello Pauline,

I hope this letter will make a difference when they determine the award for the grant you seek for BITS. Please make any edits and suggest any rewrites that you wish to bring out the most important points I might have missed as well as deleting anything that may not serve your purpose.

Thank you again for the opportunity to help BITS grow and serve more individuals with disabilities veterans or not.

To Whom It May Concern:

I am a Persian Gulf War veteran suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder since 1993. During the early onset of my condition I was treated with medications that barley kept me functioning as a single parent of two small children. After five years the prescribed medications dosage were increase to the point where my body rejected it. I tried many different combinations of new drugs without success, thus I aggressively pursued alternative treatments and programs that would help me maintain power and control over my mental Illness. My journey has consisted of spans of  chronic homelessness where I lived is shelters, in my car as well as sharing rooms in strangers apartments.  I had traveled through seven states and lived in 16 different cities. After a failed relationship in Goffstown, I sought relief at the Liberty House Transitional Home for Veterans in Manchester, New Hampshire, in the Fall of 2013. I lived with ten other veterans in a communal environment. We shared chores of cooking and cleaning while accessing the many community services that lead to independence and stability and balance in my life.

I was offered an opportunity to take part in an equine therapy program and Back In The Saddle Equine Therapy Center  (BITS) in Hopkinton, New Hampshire. After taking the tour of the facilities, meeting  the horses, staff and volunteers I was ready to commit to the 8 week Ride UP Program for 2 hours each Saturday.  This program is offered at no cost to veterans.The calm peaceful setting was a welcome change to the many cities I had roamed and lived searching for a place I could call home. I never imagined what profound effect horses could have on my life. Much of my focus was placed on obtaining quality mental healthcare, searching for part time work and secure stable affordable housing. BITS offered me a chance to relax while working beyond my comfort zone caring for animals. I soon discovered a passion for horsemanship.

The staff there are knowledgeable, friendly and excited to instruct me and 3 other Liberty House residents and two female veterans also interested in horsemanship and riding. They taught us how to behave around horses. They pointed out the horses' body language and their psychology. With these guidelines in place I developed confidence to groom Rosie, the gentle grey mare I was assigned. Each week I felt excited with the approaching Saturday just thinking about the new lessons I would learn. Time spent  at BITS with Rosie, grooming, tacking up, feeding, leading and eventually mounting her learning to ride granted me  a new found confidence. This was a pleasant and unexpected surprise.   After the program ended I wanted to give back to this much worthy non-profit. I started with the Liberty House's network of current and former residents. I recruited and organized two other veterans into a work detail tasked out to cut and split logs into  firewood. This fundraiser helped offset the ongoing expenses it takes to keep this valued program accessible to all persons with a variety of disables, not just veterans.  I sought to do as much as I could beyond working with the horses. Like many farms, there is something that needs to be fixed or improved for efficiency. Without my own transportation I was limited as to how often and how much time I could spend at BITS.

That following Spring I was able to buy a reliable car from the extra money I earned as a part time dishwasher at a local diner. I was now able to  drive myself the 30 miles two days a week to volunteer to complete barn chores, feed, turnout and exercise the therapeutic heard. I had moved into a shared apartment with strangers who's conversation was limited to when the rent was due and if anyone needed the bathroom?. My daydreams of being at BITS fueled my passion to care for horses. I was eager to  complete the volunteer training  get to work. I was assisted the staff during the lessons for the diverse clientele. I was witness to the healing power of the horses as the months past. Many clients, most of them small children with severe emotional or  physical or mental conditions or a combination thereof showed a positive change in their lives' after a few weeks coming to BITS. My role as a volunteer gave me a sense of purpose as a valued team member in this ongoing healing program. Having meaningful work that helped others, gave me personal gratification beyond any paycheck could offer. In June, I witnessed the annual horse show. There I saw a few familiar faces proudly displaying their riding skill and horsemanship before their family and friends. Moreover, I met more folks who attend therapeutic lessons, all had a contagious excitement as they rode with broad smiles and hardy laughter that echoed throughout the campus.I had found a community that shares a passion for animals ( horses especially) and lending a helping hand to those helping themselves reach personal achievements.

Working during the winter months is challenging and limiting due to the unpredictable and severe weather here in New Hampshire. Much of the time is spent clearing walkways to round-pens, paddocks, pastures , riding arena, riding dome, the port-a-potty and the manure pile. Below freezing temperatures make watering horses in the pastures especially challenging. I donated a new hose reel to ease the burden of this essential task. Fence repair and stall wall replacement were frequently at the top of the task list.created by the barn manager.

This experience  opened my eyes to think strategically and critically to work smarter with the limited  financial resources available. I offered suggestions for improvement to the Executive Director, Pauline Meridian, who often smiled when replying "We could do that if we had more funding". Soon she invited me to consider joining the Board Of Directors as a Veteran's Liaison. This position allowed me to participate in outreach efforts in the community like talking to members of the Concord Chamber of Commerce during the Business After Hours monthly events. This was a huge challenge for me personally to talk with strangers about the programs at BITS and the value it had added to my life and the lives of the other patrons. Pauline and I traveled the region with the herd of miniature horses Gypsy, Flyer and Mystic to engage with the public at events like the Concord Market Days Street Festival and my favorite annual outing to the Veterans Home in Tilton during their Family Day event. We also ventured to Manchester for Fishercats games and to Nashua for the Apple Fest. Although we recruited new clients and volunteers we were unable to land a corporate donor to partner with us to fund capital improvement projects like repairing the cap of the indoor riding dome.

During 2018 the Manchester Veterans Hospital underwent majors changes that brought Mr. Alfred Montoya to become it's Director. I organized the owners of two other therapeutic riding centers in Southern New Hampshire, Touchtone Farm and Upreach Center to meet and strategize ways to approach the Veterans Administration officials in an attempt to help more veterans with the diverse programs each center offered. We collaborated together and complied a brochure that described each facility and the specific programs offered. We met several times with Mr. Montoya and his staff at each facility and held Open Barn Day for veterans and their families to explore each center and what program could meet their individual need. We were successful in raising awareness of the many benefits of equine therapy and gained volunteers and new clients. However, what is lacking is an institution to conduct research of our programs, collectively or individually that will compel medical and mental health professionals to prescribe equine assisted activities and therapy as a course of treatment to maintain stability and wellness for New Hampshire's veteran population.

My experience with BITS goes beyond feeding my passion for horses. I have replaced my isolation with a community of caring people driven to help persons with disabilities improve their lives with equine assisted activities. I have learned much about managing a farm and returned to college to study Sustainable Agriculture. Most of all my leadership skills have improved because I have honed my organizing and advocacy skills to improve programs and services for veterans to sustain their health and wellness. I continue to take power and control over my mental conditions that keep me on Social Security Disability, yet I have hope to live a richer life because I have a place to belong. A mission to serve others through the power healing with horses.

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