



Impacts & Innovations

Nonprofit Charity Impacts Wounded Combat Veterans And Children Facing Adversity

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- ▶ Mental and physical health challenges, especially for returning war veterans and their families, is a growing national concern.
- ▶ A grassroots program featuring equine therapy for these patients and their families shows promise in increasing self-esteem and self-confidence, reducing isolation and depression, and improving speaking and writing skills.



Barbara O'Brien

SANCTUARY ISLAND INC. is a grassroots program to support alternative and fun ways to address depression, isolation, and low self-esteem in children facing adversity, and wounded combat veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. Too many veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and physical disabilities are returning from the wars

and living isolated in the woods, committing suicide, and divorcing. Grassroots programs can improve this situation for the veterans, their children, spouses, and parents (Briggs, 2013; Fischer, 2013; Iraqi and Afghanistan Veterans of America, 2011; Marczak, 2012; PTSD Foundation of America, 2014).

Phase 1: Planting a Seed

A need was identified to change a depressive state by increasing self-esteem, self-confidence, reducing isolation, and improving speaking and writing skills.

Goal. Support and encourage a college graduate in communications, and an independent journalist, to write and publish his works. He has been physically challenged since birth and was suffering a deep depression due to many barriers in post college years. Writing to heal was the approach and his first unpublished work, *Ultimate Conflict*, is a nonfiction, dark-side look at life during high school years. The unpublished works reside in a trunk for safekeeping.

Our Story

In 2006, as part of Magnetic HealthCare Strategies, LLC, a consulting business, a former school tea-

cher, Judith Arkebauer, suggested to Barbara O'Brien to have her son Marc, a Barry University communications graduate on disability due to cerebral palsy, to volunteer and write uplifting, health teaching, literature for children based on his personal experiences (O'Brien, 2008; 2009). He agreed and wrote a book called *Peter the Peteeatrick Panda's™ Playground*. This colorful, whimsical, positive, and fun book introduces Peter the Panda who teaches life lessons to children ages 4-12. The book and its companion coloring books in Spanish and English teach literacy to children while they learn about health and life's experiences.

Marc researched these books by reaching out to nurses and doctors. He sought to provide children with a better understanding of what they are facing, and to not fear their experiences in health care settings. He created a cast of lovable characters for this professionally illustrated book as well as coloring books.

Marc followed up *Peter the Peteeatrick Panda's Playground* with *Special Person to Ride*, a book for older children and adults, that focuses on supporting and communicating with others facing a life challenge. This story, centered on the amazing benefits of therapeutic horseback riding, is based on Marc's personal journey, sharing the method, the activity, and the positive results he achieved. Although Marc's goal in life is to communicate through writing, this project was a wonderful venue for him to see the positive side of life. His writing progression was in many ways a healing process (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005; Chen, 2013; Pennebaker, 2004).

In the spring of 2010, Marc and Barbara O'Brien were invited speakers at Emory University Medical School's International Conference on Medical Volunteerism in Atlanta, GA. After the presentation, Dr. Neil Shulman, associate professor, Emory University Medical School; Barbara Rose, president/founder, New Generation Partnerships; and Michael Daly, president, Creative Solutions Inc. and executive director, Orange Duffle Bag, suggested several creative means through which Marc could support others by replicating his story. Thus, the concept and idea for Sanctuary Island Inc. was born, with its vision to service others facing adversity and special life challenges.

While supporting Marc to write for healing and to feel self-worth by assisting others, the seed for Sanctuary Island Inc. developed and grew. In 2011, Sanctuary Island Inc. became a 501(c)(3) public charity. Emory University invited us back as speakers and

BARBARA O'BRIEN, MSN, RN, is President/Founder, Magnetic HealthCare Strategies, LLC, Manchester, NJ; and President/Co-Founder, Sanctuary Island, Inc., Indiatlantic, FL.

Table 1.
Sanctuary Island Inc. SWOT Analysis Results:
Completed by Barbara Rose
New Generation Partnerships

Strengths	Opportunities
Dedicated founders with appropriate experience	Partnerships with other organizations
	Sanctuary Island can be a grassroots leader in helping to provide a better life for those who have given so much.
Strong, dedicated multi-talented board from several states	Inform public of need and effects of modalities.
Long track record of success of therapeutic riding and writing for healing for other disabilities	Increase visibility, knowledge, and success of nonmedical alternative methods for healing the whole person.
	Ability to recruit highly visible and highly respected military
	Develop plan for stewardship to mentor and solicit ongoing support from donors and sponsors. Find out what the donors and sponsors want to see or need.
Weaknesses	Threats
Lack of widespread awareness	Large number on nonprofit charities competing for funds
Need for stronger branding	Economic times
	Lack of funding for media coverage and advertising
Wider recognition	Lack of track record and measured outcomes
Track record and credibility	Insufficient literature support

as exhibitors in 2011, 2012, and 2013, which provided Marc with the experience to develop self-confidence in speaking publically to a large international audience. For the past 2 years, the conference has been a Global Humanitarian Summit. Each year, our mentor, Dr. Shulman, challenged us to take the next step and grow.

Phase 2: Strategy and Plan Roll Out

State a mission. The mission for Sanctuary Island Inc. is to service wounded combat veterans, other disabled persons, and children facing adversity.

Develop a vision. To provide a venue to enhance the health, literacy, life experience and self-esteem of wounded combat veterans, other disabled persons, and children facing adversity.

Achieving 501(c)(3) status. Establish a board, name the nonprofit, write bylaws, SWOT analysis, apply for state registration and then 501(c)(3) status, build mentors, join support groups (see Table 1).

Board members. Select board members based on desire and interest to support a small nonprofit organization. We established three levels. Executive (3-4 members); voting general board of directors (8 members); and a nonvoting advisory board. Each member of the founding board was selected because of his or her experience, ability to network, and knowledge of nonprofits or service population.

Name the nonprofit. The name was selected by Co-Founder/Author Marc O'Brien and was adopted from his writings of *Ultimate Conflict*. Sanctuary Island Inc. is an imaginary place for comfort, relaxation, trust, and friendship. Sanctuary Island Inc. is not a brick and mortar enterprise but rather an organization that fosters peace and tranquility where one can ride, read, write, meet friends, and have fun.

Bylaws. State the mission, vision, and goals and objectives; define service population; define board responsibilities; define board member roles and responsibilities; outline meeting schedule; define voting and decision-making.

State of Florida registration and tax free status and Internal Revenue Service paperwork. Prepared by co-founders, president, and treasurer; reviewed by a CPA.

Review of the literature identified the enormity of the returning wounded combat veteran population's health care needs (see Table 2). These needs will not only put stress on military facilities but families aging parents, spouses and children, nonmilitary health care providers, schools, and communities. Many live homeless, do not seek help, and therefore are not diagnosed.

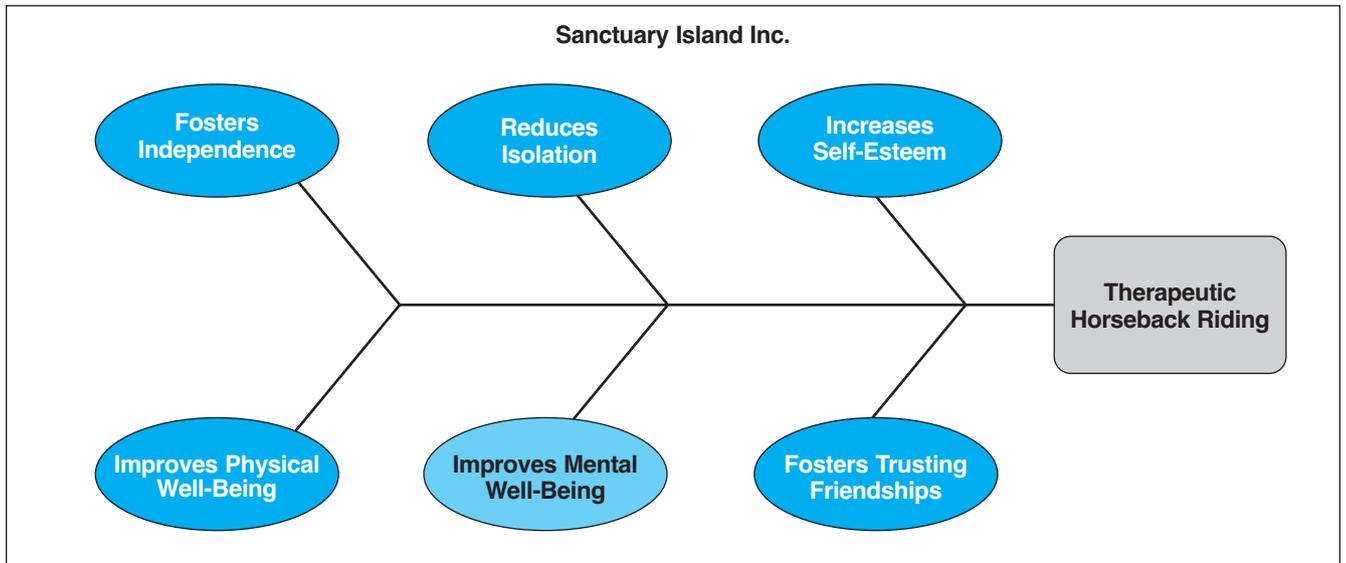
Research on the effects of therapeutic horseback riding and writing for healing on this population is virtually nonexistent. Effects on other disabilities such as autism, physical handicaps, and mental illness are sparse (Bizub, Joy, & Davidson, 2003; Froug et al., 2013; Kenniso, 2007; MacLean, 2011). Since populations are small, the need to replicate with small samples recommended in the literature is imperative as large samples sizes are, for the most part, nonexistent. The theory of helping one vet or child at a time is more common.

Individual vignettes, interviews, and self-published writings of participating individuals leads one to believe the benefits are difficult to measure, samples are small but self-reported outcomes are very positive and have changed lives (Canales, 2013; Monroe, 2012; O'Brien 2009, 2013).

Phase 3: Vignettes

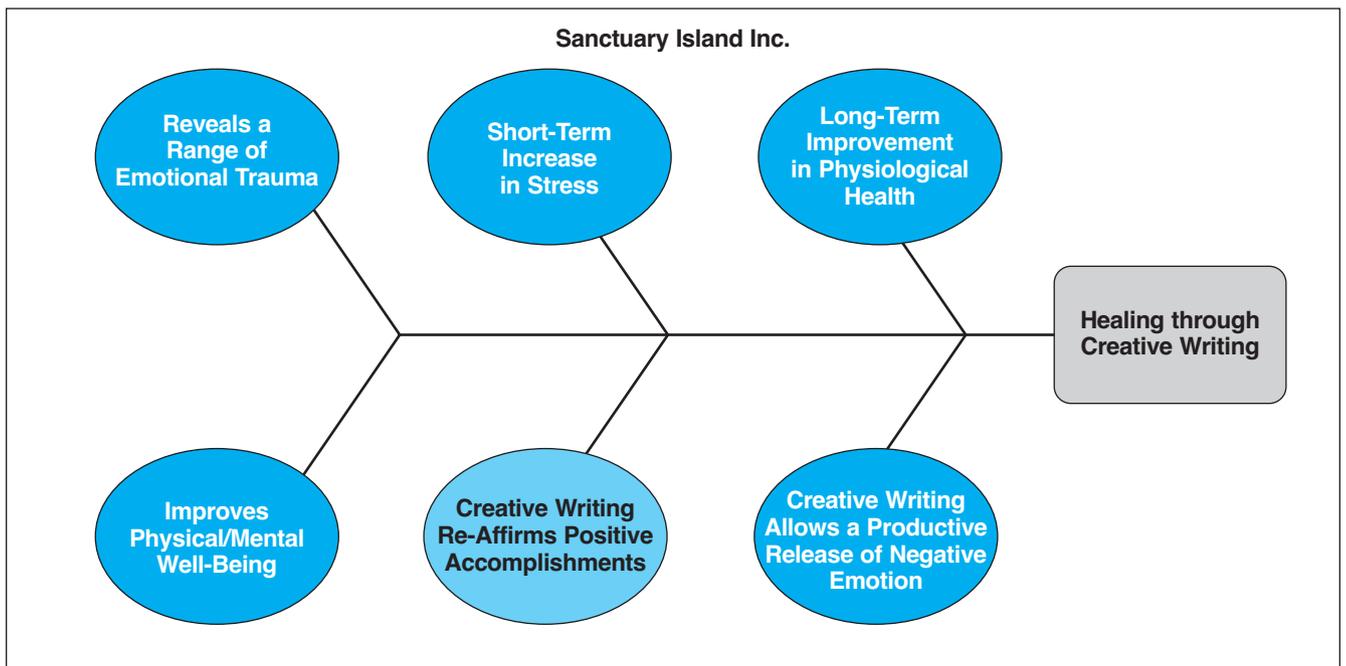
The co-founder's journey of participating in therapeutic horseback riding (equine therapy), healing

Figure 1.
Summary of Main Outcomes Addressed by Therapeutic Horseback Riding



SOURCES: Bizub et al., 2003; Brandt, 2013; Canalas, 2013; Eggiman, 2006; Froug et al., 2013; Jackson, 2012; MacClean, 2011; Masters, 2010; Rugari, Sayda, & Kenned, 2013

Figure 2.
Summary of Outcomes in the Literature Derived from Creative Writing and Healing



SOURCES: Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005; Chen, 2013; Kenniso, 2007; Pennebaker, 2004; Weinman, Ebrecht, Scott, Walburn, & Dyson, 2008

Table 2.
Summary of Diagnosed Cases Relating to the Casualties of War

Range of Dates Included	Total Active Military with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder	Total Veterans with Traumatic Brain Injury	Total Number of Amputations	Suicide
2000-2012 Diagnosed	Deployed 103, 792			
	Not deployed 27,549			
	Veterans not identified and many undiagnosed as they do not go for help			
2000-2012 August		253,330		
As of December 2012			1,715	
2001-2012				Active military 3,000 or approximately 1 per day
				Veterans 22 per day; total statistics not released by Veterans Administration

SOURCES: Fischer, 2013; Williams, 2012; Zoroya, 2013

through expressive writing, and supporting others was replicated for veterans experiencing PTSD, physical disabilities, and other issues related to their service (see Figures 1 & 2). According to Marc O'Brien "horseback riding provided me with a feeling of independence, freedom, and trusting friendships. While writing fiction and nonfiction self-published books, I was able to see the good and positive outcomes I had experienced while recognizing that the unpleasant experiences were part of the journey and moved me forward. My skills for public speaking were enhanced and self-worth and self-esteem re-confirmed when participating and presenting at the Emory University Medical School Global Humanitarian Summit."

For Candy Lovett, a gulf war Veteran with traumatic brain injury, PTSD, and terminal breast cancer, horseback riding was on her bucket list. In an interview with Marc O'Brien, Candy relates, "The difference between trotting and galloping is feeling the wind in your hair and nothing else on your mind but the beauty of the moment" (O'Brien, 2013, p. 6). Candy road Chanter, a 26-year-old appendix quarter horse, at Heavenly Hoofs Farm in Florida. She says, "Chanter knew I was gentle and compassionate and all I wanted from the ride was for both of us to enjoy the freedom of the ride and the nature around us" (O'Brien, 2013, p. 7).

At one session Candy included her friend and her friend's children in her experience. Sanctuary Island Inc. observers realized future projects should support

bonding of family members in this journey. In the future, children and spouses will be encouraged to ride with their parent veteran.

In a recent ABC TV interview (Canalas, 2013), Lyndon Ortiz, an Iraq Marine veteran with one eye blinded, related his experience with Heavenly Hoofs Farm. He explained how he brought his buddies from isolation in their rooms and four walls to riding as a team. Lyndon said, "It is a medicine not in pills, although not for everyone." Lyndon and this group of Iraq veterans had never ridden horses. All were suffering from physical disabilities such as traumatic brain injury, amputations, and PTSD. They took 10 riding sessions at Heavenly Hoof Farms and were taught to trust each other through specific exercises. Some completed golf instructions and played free at Sanctuary Island Inc.'s golf tournament. The end result, self-reported and observed, were team trust, new friendships, reduced isolation, physical improvement, and independence. At the end of their ten riding sessions, the seven veterans opened the SPUR Rodeo (the official state rodeo of Florida), entering the arena on horseback, carrying flags and wearing fatigues. There was not a dry eye in the house.

Dr. Manette Monroe (2012), University of Central Florida, administered a social research questionnaire before and after each veteran started the 10-week program. The sample size was small and replication is recommended of this unpublished study, but positive results were obtained.

Military children have been included in Sanctuary Island's population of children facing adversity (Baker & Berry, 2009). Reading, play acting stories from O'Brien's book, and sharing moments with the Peter Panda character are part of the support for children facing adversity. Sanctuary Island will have hosted five children's parties in 2014 for over 500 children facing adversity or whose parents were deployed, disabled, divorced, or doing a dangerous job. The children acted out stories from *Peter The Peteeatrick Panda's Playground* and learned about life's experiences. All received finger puppets and a signed book from the author who was a role model of accomplishing goals against the odds.

Phase 4: The Future

This program is a work in progress and is certainly not a cure. These are complementary modalities which have self-reported positive impact on the lives of the author, wounded combat veterans, and children.

Sanctuary Island is a small grassroots program which, if expanded, could have a major beneficial impact on those suffering from physical and mental health issues. These are national health care issues that not only affect patients, but families and communities as well. Nursing leaders with social work, occupational therapy, and physical therapy expertise are in the best position to impact the results of such a program. This framework is fertile ground for nursing research, evidence-based practice, and replication. Prevention and healing alternatives are keys to proactive healing for this population and their families rather than allowing the situation to escalate to suicide or violent acts.

The next step for Sanctuary Island Inc. is to bring family and friends (Baker & Berry, 2009) into the support population, possibly riding with the wounded warrior. Research projects to measure outcomes of equine therapy are also needed. Lastly, Sanctuary Island will continue to apply for grants to expand the program to New Jersey, North Carolina, and Nevada. \$

REFERENCES

- Baikie, K.A., & Wilhelm, K. (2005). Emotional and physical health benefits of expressing writing. *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment, 11*, 338-346.
- Baker, L., & Berry, K. (2009). Development issues impacting military families with young children during single and multiple deployments. *Military Medicine, 174*, 1033-1040.
- Bizub, A.L., Joy, A., & Davidson, L. (2003). It's like being in another world: Demonstrating the benefits of the therapeutic horseback riding for individuals with psychiatric disability. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal, 26*(4), 377-384.
- Brandt, C., (2013). Equine-facilitated psychotherapy as a complementary treatment intervention. *The Practitioner Scholar: Journal of Counseling and Professional Psychology, 2*, 23-42.
- Briggs, B. (2013). *30 percent of Iraqi and Afghanistan veterans have mulled suicide: Survey*. Retrieved from <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/other/30-percent-iraq-afghanistan-veterans-have-mulled-suicide-survey-f6C10811908>
- Canales, A. (2013, November 26). *Standing up for heroes*. Retrieved from <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2013/11/wounded-marine-vet-helps-other-vets-through-equine-therapy/>
- Chen, P. (2013, February 10). *When patients share their stories, health may improve*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/10/health/views/10chen.html>
- Eggiman, J. (2006). Cognitive-behavioral therapy: A case report – animal assisted therapy. *Advanced Practice Nursing eJournal, 6*(3). Retrieved from <http://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/545439>
- Fischer, H. (2013). U.S. military statistics: Operation New Dawn, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation Enduring Freedom. *Congressional Research Service*. Retrieved from <http://journalistsresource.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/RS22452.pdf>
- Froug, R., Baughman, D., Bennett T., Renee-Smith, R., Merrill, S., & Farrington, T. (2013). The effects of equine assisted psychotherapy on anxiety and depression in the chronically mentally ill. *NADD Bulletin, X*(1). Retrieved from <http://thenadd.org/modal/bulletins/v10n1a3~.htm>
- Iraqi and Afghanistan Veterans of America. (2011). *Suicide and mental health. Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America*. Retrieved from <http://iava.org/issues-and-campaigns/suicide-and-mental-health>
- Jackson, J. (2012). *Animal-assisted therapy: The human-animal bond in relation to human health and wellness*. Winona, MN: Winona State University.
- Kenniso, M. (2007). *Reflective writing: A healing voice for the silent*. Paper presented at 18th International Nursing Research Congress Focusing on Evidence-Based Practice. Retrieved from https://stti.confex.com/stti/congrs07/techprogram/paper_32201.htm
- MacLean, B. (2011). Equine-assisted therapy. *Journal of Rehabilitation Research & Development, 48*(7): ix-xii. doi:10.1682/JRRD.2011.05.0085
- Marczak, T. (2012). *Active duty suicides rise to one-per-day as war draws down*. Retrieved from <http://www.mintpressnews.com/?s=Active+duty+suicides+rise+to+one+perday++as+war+draws+down>
- Masters, N. (2010). *Equine assisted psychotherapy for combat veterans with PTSD*. Vancouver, WA: Washington State University.
- Monroe, M. (2012). *Social research to measure outcomes before and after equine assisted therapy*. Orlando, FL: University of Central Florida.
- O'Brien, M. (2008). *Peter the Peteeatrick Panda's™ Playground*: Melbourne, FL: Bluenote Books.
- O'Brien, M. (2009). *A special person to ride*. Melbourne, FL: Bluenote Books
- O'Brien, M. (2013). *Peaceful memories: Candy Lovett's journey*. Luxembourg: CreateSpace Publishing.
- Pennebaker, J. (2004). *Writing to heal: A guided journal for recovering from trauma and emotional upheaval*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications Inc.
- PTSD Foundation of America. (2014). *The statistics*. Retrieved from <http://ptsdusa.org/what-is-ptsd/the-statistics/>
- Rugari, S., Sayda M., & Kenned, A. (2013). A horse is a horse – and sometimes part of a clinical team, too. *American Nurse Today, 8*(9). Retrieved from <http://www.americannursetoday.com/a-horse-is-a-horse-and-sometimes-part-of-a-clinical-team-too/>
- Weinman, J., Ebrecht, M., Scott, S., Walburn, J., Dyson, M. (2008). Enhanced wound healing after emotional disclosure intervention. *British Journal of Health Psychology, 13*, 95-102. doi: 10.1348/135910707X251207
- Williams, T. (2012, June 9). Suicides outpacing war deaths for troops. *The New York Times*, p. A10.
- Zoroya, G. (2013, July 30). Newest veterans say suicide is their biggest challenge. *USA Today*. Retrieved from <http://www.usatoday.com/story/nation/2013/07/30/iraq-afghanistan-veterans-say-suicide-biggest-issue-they-face/2599085/>

He sought to provide children with a better understanding of what they are facing, and to not fear their experiences in health care settings. He created a cast of lovable characters for this professionally illustrated book as well as coloring books. Marc followed up Peter the Peteeatrick Panda's Playground with Special Person to Ride, a book for older children and adults, that focuses on supporting and communicating with others facing a life challenge. This story, centered on the amazing benefits of therapeutic horseback riding, is based on Marc's personal journey, sharing the Nonprofit charity impacts wounded combat veterans and children facing adversity. Nursing Economic\$, 32, 270-274. Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International. (2013). WWP tips on working with wounded veterans. Retrieved from <https://www.pathintl.org/component/content/article/28-centers/general/594-www-tips>. Selby, A. & Smith-Osborne, A. (2013). Examining effects of equine-assisted activities to help combat veterans improve quality of life. *Journal of Rehabilitation Research and Development*, 50, vii-xiii. doi:10.1682/JRRD.2013.07.0159 [CrossRef]. MacLean, B. (2011). The number of children in armed conflict zones are around 250 million. They confront physical and mental harms from war experiences. "Armed conflict" is defined in two ways according to International Humanitarian Law: "1) international armed conflicts, opposing two or more States, 2) non-international armed conflicts, between governmental forces and nongovernmental armed groups, or between such groups only."