



LET ME BE YOUR hero

Words Imogen Johnson

We meet some amazing people whose lives have been changed by horses and find out about the couple who have made it all possible



When we're caught up in the stresses of everyday life it can be easy to take our horses for granted. Here we're reminded of the *amazing things* our *equine friends* have to offer and meet people who've benefited from the work of UK organisation **Horses Helping People (HHP)**

MEET THE FOUNDERS

Dave Johnson and Debbie La-Haye of Horses Helping People (HHP) each have a lifetime of experience with horses. As well as training horses for Western and

teaching horsemanship, they've spent the last 10 years providing therapeutic horsemanship services to people from disadvantaged backgrounds. The couple

make it clear that they're not a Riding for the Disabled (RDA) organisation - they're open to anyone and everyone who wants to take part in what they do.



WHAT DOES HHP OFFER?

Debbie and Dave created HHP in 2007, based in Aston Clinton on the Buckinghamshire/Hertfordshire border, in order to provide therapeutic horsemanship to people from all walks of life and particularly to those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

"We aren't therapists and we don't offer therapy, but what people experience with the horses when they come to HHP is therapeutic," explains Debbie.

"Quite often people with disabilities, mental or physical, are labelled and they're surrounded by doctors and therapists who constantly ask how they are. HHP offers a place for them where they can be a little more introspective. They come here to be with the horses who don't see those labels, they just let them be who they want to be."

HHP, which is funded by sessional charges plus the help of grants and sponsorship, aims to help people to develop trust, empathy, patience, flexibility and understanding, and learn how to set boundaries. By spending time with horses, people can learn how to do all of these things.

"Horses give immediate feedback and people see themselves reflected in the

horses' behaviour - as a result of this they can learn about themselves, then keep the things they like and discard the things they don't," says Debbie.

WHO CAN BENEFIT?

The couple make it clear that anyone can benefit from what they do and that all are welcome.

Whether you're looking to try something new, want to work on your confidence, self-awareness, social skills, your ability to connect with your own horse - or even if you'd

just like to give Western riding a go - there's something to be gained by people from all walks of life. But, as Dave explains, their work is especially important for people with mental and physical disabilities.

"People with disabilities are regularly

made to feel like they can't achieve things. But when they spend time with the horses here, whether they're leading them or riding, I often say to them 'you've just moved this horse left and right, you've asked him to stop and guided him around the arena; in doing that you've just manoeuvred half a tonne - if you can do that, you can do anything!' Here it's all about what you can achieve, not what you can't, and far too often people aren't encouraged to think like that," he says.

Of course, Debbie and Dave take care to ensure that they offer a safe and pressure-free environment for everyone they help and this includes practical safety measures, making contact with the support workers of people who attend and giving each individual person the help that's right for them.

"In the conventional horse world many people don't realise the implications of some of the things they might say or do," explains Dave.

"For example, we have to think about the use of whips - how does that look to a person who's been physically abused? Or the way people might talk about selling horses who don't quite fit the bill. Discuss that with someone from a care home and they'll immediately relate to it. We have to think about their feelings and ensure that they always feel like a valued human being, because they are."



DID YOU KNOW?
HHP also runs training courses for people interested in therapeutic horsemanship or equine facilitated learning as a career - see www.horsehelpingpeople.co.uk

YOUR HORSE

The HHP horses

All of the horses at the centre are specially trained to cope with potentially scary or unusual situations.

"Our horses need to be rock solid but they also need to remain responsive to the emotional state of the people who come to us. They can't be so completely desensitised they switch off - they have to be confident physically and responsive

mentally," says Debbie.

Debbie and Dave make sure that any time spent with the horses is also time spent training them.

"We have to get our horses used to anything and everything. That includes loud noises and things that look spooky. We also have to ensure that they're happy to be touched, so simple groundwork such as rubbing

them all over with our hands or ropes, etc, is really important," says Dave.

"They also have to be respectful, move out of our space when asked, and even stop if their rider loses balance. There's a great deal they need to learn, which is why it's so important that we give them the time they need - after all, they didn't ask to be here."



Dave spends time training Dollar

VOLUNTEERING AT HHP

Having volunteered at HHP for more than two years, Claire Gunn sees first-hand how much horses can give to a person.

"I'd been unwell for a while and when I got better I decided that I'd really like to do some volunteering. HHP isn't far from where I live so I got in touch and the rest is history," says Claire.

"I started helping out in the summer

so there was a lot of poo-picking involved but straight away I loved it. I felt as though I became part of the team and quickly realised how much I could benefit from just being around the horses - I didn't need to ride, I could just be with them.

"I also learnt how the way I am can affect other people and found it amazing how much the horses could tell me about myself through their reactions to me.

"All of the horses are such wonderful characters, especially Dollar, who's popular with everyone. It's been a privilege to volunteer for HHP - I've seen some amazing things and learnt a great deal."



Being with the horses has taught Claire a lot about herself

Both Emily and Jilly asked us not to use pictures of them to protect their privacy



Many people find just being with horses is powerful medicine

Emily

Fifteen-year-old Emily had been suffering from low self-esteem and anxiety for many years, and had reached the point where she'd not left the house in three years, except for the occasional visit to see relatives. She'd lost contact with her friends and was being educated by her mum at home.

Emily knew she didn't want to engage with conventional help from social workers or psychologists but, having heard about HHP on the radio, felt that spending time with horses was something she could try.

Over the first few weeks Emily got to know all the horses, spent time with them, watched them, groomed them, led them and rode them. She progressed to attending for two hours once a week for three 12-week courses. Each session

saw a progression in her life away from HHP.

She eventually felt comfortable making contact with an old friend, joined in on a family trip to a theme park and even helped her mum to run a Christmas fundraising event. By her final week she'd enrolled on a college course.

"Horses Helping People sounded like an environment that I could feel comfortable and safe in, away from my peers and general concerns," she says.

"Getting involved played a major role in developing my self-confidence. Initially I didn't realise how much I got from attending, other than the fact that I really enjoyed spending time with the horses and learning how to train and ride them in a western style. After several weeks, however, I noticed a huge difference in myself and in how differently I felt about spending time

away from home. My confidence and independence began to flourish and I couldn't be more grateful to Debbie, Dave, their son Morgan and all the horses for what they've done for me.

"I had a special connection with one horse in particular, Ellie. In learning to understand her and the way her mind works, I learnt to understand myself. I don't think I've ever felt more calm or peaceful than I did when riding Ellie."

Jilly

Jilly has struggled through life with various mental health issues including depression, eating disorders, borderline personality disorder and being bipolar. Her mood can drop very quickly, making her feel alone and likely to self-harm. She's tried conventional counselling and psychology, been in hospital six times and spent two years in day services - all of which helped her to a point, but only to exist, not to move on.

While on holiday in Cornwall she came across a group of horses on the cliff tops. She'd always loved the look of horses, but found them frightening. Something about this particular group of horses moved her deeply. For a while she watched them looking out to sea and remembers feeling in awe of them. When she later returned home Jilly told her support worker about the horses and she in turn told Jilly about Horses Helping People.

"I've never felt confident around people and I thought that if I pushed myself to face my fear of horses, which are big animals, it might help me with groups of people," says Jilly. "I hoped that getting some sort of connection with horses could help me to manage stress better.

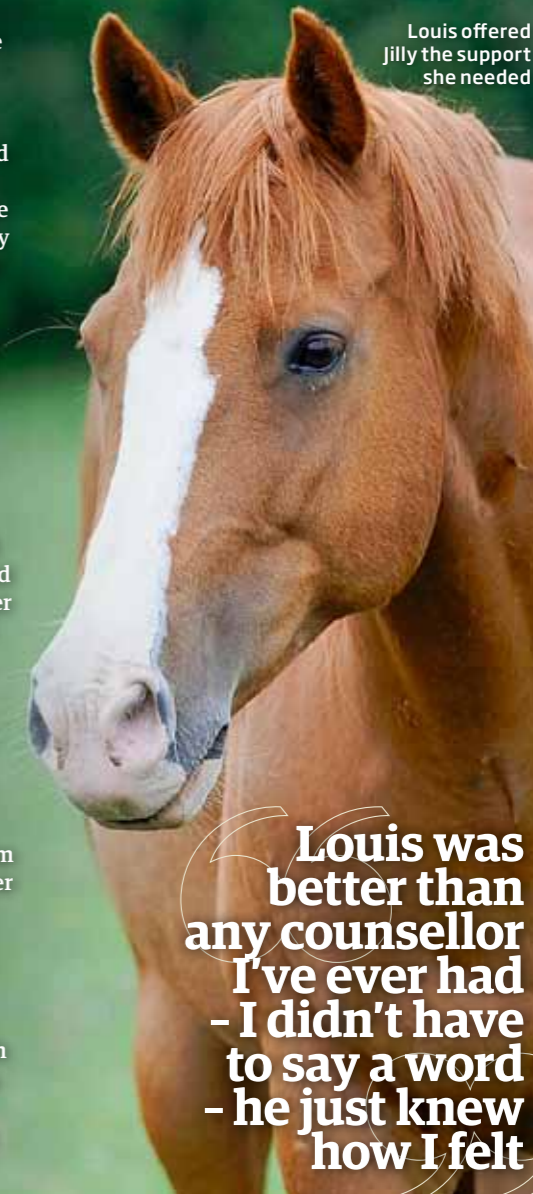
"I often arrive at Horses Helping People feeling stressed and always leave feeling calmer. My mental

health nurse says it's the first time in seven years that I've spoken positively about something.

"My most memorable moment at HHP was with Louis. Debbie and I were standing at the field gate, discussing working with one of the younger horses. I was feeling at my lowest since coming to HHP. I was feeling so alone and sad inside. Suddenly Louis, the quietest member of the herd, appeared. It was as if he sensed my feelings and when he reached me he put his head against my chest. I felt massively comforted by him - it was as if he could read my mind. The connection was so profound that I started crying but he wasn't at all distressed by it and just stood quietly beside me. Louis was better than any counsellor I've ever had - I didn't have to say a word - he just knew how I felt. We stood together silently for what must have been more than 20 minutes. Eventually it was me who broke the connection and Louis just quietly walked away. Now I use that memory to draw strength from whenever I feel low and I will never forget what Louis did for me.

"Horses have given meaning to my life, a reason for existence, as they replace the turmoil in my head with peace. The horses are just there, free and getting on with their lives. They're not aggressive hunters, they're just beautiful. Before going to HHP I had no idea how much they could give." 🐾

Louis offered Jilly the support she needed



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Kevin can be himself when he's around Kinder



FIND OUT MORE
For more information about the centre and volunteering, and to see the HHP horses, visit www.horseshelpingpeople.co.uk

MEET THE PEOPLE WHO'VE BEEN HELPED BY HORSES...

Kevin

Kevin, who's in his forties, is deaf, non-verbal and autistic. His family members heard about Debbie and Dave through one of his carers and now take him to HHP for 30-minute sessions twice a week.

"Kevin doesn't behave the way society wants him to behave, so conventional social situations can be difficult for him and his family," explains Debbie.

"Here, he can just be himself. The horses treat him exactly the same as they treat everyone else. He normally spends some time grooming then leading the horses and he loves riding - he often rides with his eyes closed and sings when he's happy.

"Most importantly, when Kevin leads a horse he can make choices about where he wants to go - it's about the only time in his life when he can do that, which is why HHP plays an important part in his life," she says.

We went along to the centre and watched as Kevin spent some time with a mare called Kinder. He seemed

happy and relaxed as he groomed her, then confidently took charge leading her around the arena and over some poles. Because Kevin is unable to clearly communicate with Debbie, she kept a close eye on Kinder to gauge her reactions to Kevin.

"If Kinder looks relaxed and happy then I know that Kevin feels relaxed and happy too. If there's any tension or worry, Kinder will pick that up from Kevin and I will be able to tell by watching her behaviour," explains Debbie.

