



# **Veteran Rides Horse Across U.S. to Raise Money for PTSD Rescue Ranch**

by Sydney Sinks, News Reporter  
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EDWARDSVILLE - Mustang horses and service dogs will be the guests of honor at a fundraising event at Triangle H Farms this weekend. From 2–4 p.m. on Saturday, July 15, people can stop by, see the animals and help raise money for veterans.

The event's proceeds will go toward funding The Righteous Life Rescue Ranch (TRLRR), which will provide a home for dogs and mustangs. As plans for the ranch solidify, founder Matt Perella hopes that it will help veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) heal through nature, equine therapy and time with service dogs.

“I’ve lost so many friends to suicide,” Perella said. “It’s just really dear to me to give back to the animals that have helped me. There’s so many horses that need to be rescued and so many dogs that need to be rescued and so many veterans that need to be rescued.”

Perella plans to work with mistreated mustangs and “death row dogs,” or dogs that have bitten people and are deemed unadoptable. Perella’s own service dog, Raffe, was considered untrainable until he took him home. For mustangs, dogs and people alike, the ranch is about second chances.

“ was about to be euthanized, and I was pretty much his last chance,” Perella explained. “That’s pretty much all the dogs that we are going to rescue. They’re going to have a really awesome story from their transition from what they were when we get them to what they’re going to be and what they’re going to do for the veterans. They’re going to be like a lifeline and support system and give the veterans new purpose to want to go on another day.

After all, that’s what Raffe did for Perella. A former U.S. Marine, Perella speaks candidly about what he calls his own “mental breakdown” and brushes with suicidality. He latched onto Raffe and his buckskin horse, Buck, during these struggles. They grounded him and kept him alive.

“It couldn’t be more perfect that I saved his life, and then six months after, he’s saving mine,” Perella said of Raffe. “It’s just too fitting. This is the power that these animals have to heal people.”

Perella, Raffe and Buck — called “The Three Amigos” — have been traveling across the U.S. to raise money for the ranch and awareness about PTSD in veterans. Perella rides Buck across the country with Raffe trotting alongside them.

That’s how they met Grace Heepke at [Triangle H Farm](#) in Edwardsville. Heepke rode with Perella one day from Edwardsville to downtown St. Louis. As they camped out that night in front of the Gateway Arch, she made arrangements to join him for another week.

“I was not in a great place when I rode with him when we first met,” Heepke said. “I asked him, ‘How are you so happy all the time?’ He had been, like, glowing all the time, and I asked him because I want that, you know? And he said, ‘You have so many bad days that it’s easy to have good days.’ That’s another thing about coming on this journey that changed my life.”

Perella eventually hired Heepke as his driver, meaning that she takes care of Buck and her own horse as they travel. They joke that she’s a “NASCAR pit crew” for the horses. Heepke has become a big part of Perella’s plans for the ranch. She’ll be involved in training the horses and teaching people how to take care of them, overseeing some basic aspects of the equine therapy.

“I jumped on it. That’s my kind of thing, but Matt being my best friend, of course that’s something I wanted to do,” Heepke said. “Coming from where he did and seeing him now with the animals and just how much it completely flipped upside down, so many people need that. All those horses need help. All those dogs could have a purpose. And then being able to help people save lives through saving the animals’ lives, it’s just too perfect. And Matt is living proof of that.”

One night, The Three Amigos were walking through Baltimore when they passed a woman who wanted to pet Buck. Perella apologized and told her they had to keep moving because it was getting dark. As they walked away, the woman said something to herself that Perella overheard — something about wanting to end her life. He stopped Buck midstep.

“She said, ‘You don’t even know how much you just saved my life right now.’ Just from her getting to touch him. I just saw the weight fall off of her,” Perella said. “It had nothing to do with me. It had nothing to do with anything else and everything to do with just her little connection in that moment with my horse.”

Perella and Heepke hope The Righteous Life Rescue Ranch will facilitate that connection for a lot of people and animals. To learn more about the fundraising event at [Triangle H Farm](#) this weekend, click [here](#) or check out the [Facebook page](#). If you want more information about the ranch, including how to donate, visit [The Righteous Life Rescue Ranch website](#).

“Through my mental breakdown, I lost confidence in myself. I didn’t want to go on another day. So that’s why I’m going big with this,” Perella said. “I’m trying to design this ranch around what has brought me back to a grounded place in life, and that’s been my horse and my dog and nature... These animals deserve a good home, and these veterans deserve these animals. Every day on the street, the power that my one horse and my one dog do for people is just proof that they heal.”

