

people

Bear Creek Stables We Honor a Neigh Savers Volunteer Jenny Whitman

Matt is one of our amazing Neigh Savers volunteers at Bear Creek Stables. He came to us with a wealth of experience and training as an equestrian. A military veteran, he has worked previously with a program for veterans in Morgan Hill called "One Step Closer." As part of this training, he participated in intensive equine therapy and undertook a challenging weeklong packing trip with six other veterans in the backcountry of Idaho. While navigating steep terrain in the Idaho wilderness, he was deeply moved by the shared experience with a powerful, yet vulnerable animal.

Determined to continue working with horses, Matt contacted Neigh Savers and asked to volunteer at Bear Creek Stables.

Matt says the connection he feels with horses is strong. He was motivated to become involved with them following a distinguished but often deeply challenging and stressful 35-year career in the military.

The second son of a Detroit, Michigan, family of five, Matt joined the U.S. military in 1979 when he was 19 years old. Boot camp in Alameda brought him to California where he was later stationed on the 400-foot Coast Guard Cutter, the U.S.S. Rush.

In 1982, Matt and his crew undertook a dangerous mission to rescue a husband and wife from a sailboat caught in a severe storm while en route from Hawaii. Despite losing radio contact with the sailboat, Matt and his crewmates redirected a supertanker from Alaska to help block the thirty-foot waves, and hoisted the wife eighty feet to safety. Unfortunately, they were not able to rescue her husband.



When 9/11 happened, Matt was assigned to the Pacific Strike Team and deployed to New York. He worked for several months as a CW04 officer examining the debris from the World Trade Center for forensic evidence.

After 9/11, Matt asked to be assigned to the Persian Gulf. He and his teammates interdicted foreign ships at sea to inspect for explosives. In 2006, he was attached to Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom.

While stationed in the Persian Gulf, Matt also volunteered for the Fallen Angels, a program that assists in returning the remains of soldiers killed in action to the United States. Matt's duties included guarding 120 flag-draped caskets during their transport home. Matt proudly remembers being able to comfort a father who was returning with the body of his son.

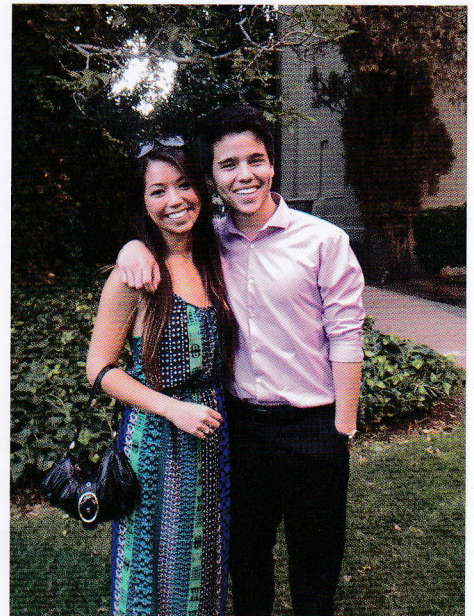
In 2007, Matt was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. Complicating his health further, he sustained a serious back injury while on active duty.

In 2013, Matt had to retire from the military because of PTSD, exhaustion, and depression. Although his family was a huge source of support, Matt also found comfort and stress relief in his interactions with the

family dog, Tucker. It was this relationship that prompted his initial inquiry to the Veteran's Administration in Palo Alto about equine therapy.

Matt is a natural fit to work with thoroughbreds. These horses need handlers who are responsive to their unique emotional and physical makeup as they transition from the racetrack to a normal life. The dangers and challenges that Matt has faced in his career, and in his own transition to civilian life, sensitized him to the subtle forms of communication required to earn the trust of these magnificent animals.

Thank you, Matt. You are a hero.



Shan McBurney-Lin, a graduate of Loma Prieta, C.T. English, Los Gatos High School, and U.C., Santa Barbara, will attend Duke Medical School this fall. Her younger brother Jim, also a Cheetah and a Wildcat, is an alumnus of U.C., San Diego, Sixth College. He will attend U.C., Riverside, as a neuroscience Ph.D. candidate.

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