In July of 2020, USU graduate student, Makenna Osborne, hosted a trail ride with a group of 12 veterans as part of her AmeriCorps experience with The Utah Higher Education AmeriCorps Network (UHEAN).

UHEAN is an education award AmeriCorps Program in the state of Utah. UHEAN utilizes students at seven colleges and university students throughout the state. UHEAN AmeriCorps Members provide support to hundreds of community organizations through direct service and capacity building efforts. The work performed by AmeriCorps members increases the ability for organizations to continue providing much-needed services in the areas of education, healthy futures and economic opportunity.

Each AmeriCorps member must recruit at least five volunteers for one hour of service each. The service project is chosen by the AmeriCorps members and is fairly open-ended as long as it helps to improve either their placement site or community directly. So far, Osborne has recruited 18 volunteers, seven of which are veterans, for a total of 45 hours.

As part of her project, Osborne organized a group of veterans and forged a bond with many participants and support staff. This group was from an in-house rehabilitation and PTSD clinic with the Department of Veterans Affairs based in Salt Lake City, and all participating veterans faced serious drug and/or alcohol addiction to cope with their PTSD. As a result of previous connections, she was able to have fascinating conversations with veterans on their second ride. Osborne never prompted these deep conversations, “but went along with what the veteran was willing to offer,” she said.

On these rides they talked about drug and alcohol addictions, she talked with veterans who had contemplated suicide multiple times before or had attempted suicide, and talked with veterans about familial and relational struggles.

“I rode next to three or four of the same vets the entire ride, and really got an inside look into their personal struggles,” Osborne said “This motivates me even more to continue on my career path to serve these veterans using my unique skill set.”

William Marchand, certified in equine-assisted psychotherapy and Clinical Director/Service Chief of Whole Health, said “veterans frequently make positives comment about Makenna’s very high level of equestrian knowledge and how much they enjoy working with her.”
The group has spent time clearing an 8-mile trail in the Wellsville Mountains sawing down logs and clearing branches after a windstorm, as well as clearing up an arena used by the Pathways to Horsemanship veteran program at Utah State University.

“My volunteers and I cleaned up all of the materials, loaded the ramp and fence panels onto trailers and stored them, as well as swept the concrete flooring to the entrance of the arena and drug the arena with an arena drag to make it pretty and usable for the group coming after us,” Osborne said.

She also said her AmeriCorps position with USU Equine Experience directly impacted her decision on what she wanted to do for the rest of her life. “Not only did I get hands-on experience working in the field of animal-assisted interventions, but I also had the opportunity to network with other professionals throughout my term of service that will impact my success in my future field,” she said “I am passionate about serving veterans and developing the skills necessary to serve this population. I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity that AmeriCorps provided me to succeed.”

Osborne is continuing the pursuit of her passion as she is now in a graduate program studying Agriculture Extension and Education through the College of Agriculture and Applied Sciences at USU. She is looking forward to developing as a professional in the equine-assisted interventions field.