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**Volunteer Profile:  
Cheff Physical Therapy Team Volunteers  
Mitch Joffe and Rene Saar**



Rene Saar, Tina the wonder horse, Jake O'Brien, Sarah Pizzie and Mitch Joffe

*This month we are profiling the volunteers of Cheff's physical therapy team: Rene Saar and Mitch Joffe.*



*Rene and Tina*

## **Rene Saar**

Rene started volunteering at Cheff eight years ago through her friend Char Swain, who happens to be Cheff's physical therapist. Her initial plan was to help Char temporarily by filling in as a physical therapy (PT) volunteer for just a short time. Once involved, however, she loved the experience and has been a key part of the PT program ever since.

Rene grew up in South Bend, IN, where her family owned a gasoline service station. As a kid, she helped out at the station. Being South Bend, a number of customers were affiliated with the University of Notre Dame, so a perk of the job was crossing paths with the likes of Fighting Irish quarterback Joe Montana and his car.

Rene went to college at Indiana University and Ball State and then worked in orthopedic medical sales. Her husband's job at Stryker brought them to Michigan; they now live in Richland. They have two children – their son, a former pro hockey player, lives in the area and their daughter is in Austin, TX.

Rene has always had a passion for horses. She got her first horse about 15 years ago and now has two: a Paint and a Kentucky Mountain Horse, which is a gaited breed. She's done obstacle courses and a lot of trail riding. Recently she started regular lessons with Chief (her Paint) to learn Western Dressage. A nice thing about training in a discipline like dressage, Rene said, is it gives rider and horse very specific goals to work on together. She hopes to compete in the future. She's also a fan of hiking and golf.

In PT sessions, Rene and fellow volunteer Mitch assist in various ways including helping with therapy movements and assisting the patient to stay safely on the horse. Rene is also experienced as a PT horse handler, so she can fill in as needed to drive the horse from behind using the long lines.

One of her favorite horses in the PT program was Ricky, who many volunteers will remember -- a sweet Morgan who did great work and sadly passed away not long ago. She is also especially fond of Tina, who works in both PT and therapeutic riding.





Mitch, showing his Cheff pride!

## Mitch Joffe

After retiring from his career as a food service broker, Mitch was interested in volunteering in the community, so he looked online for Kalamazoo area opportunities. A listing for the Cheff Center, with its mention of horses, caught his eye. He followed up and has now been a Cheff volunteer for 10 years.

Mitch initially worked with therapeutic riding classes. Then one day he happened to be around when the PT team needed another volunteer. He was able to help out and has since been a regular with both therapeutic riding and PT, meaning he's often at Cheff two or more days a week.

Mitch grew up in the NW Chicago suburbs. His father owned a drug store in downtown Chicago, so he also spent a fair amount of time in the Loop, helping out at the store. He attended college in Arizona, but came back to Chicagoland each summer, where he got some unique experience working with horses for three summers as a groom at Arlington Park Racecourse.

What does a racetrack groom do? As Mitch describes it, they are like nannies for the racehorses, who are typically two or three-year-old Thoroughbreds. Grooms do just about everything, from actual grooming, to checking for injuries, feeding, bandaging, mucking stalls, and preparing horses for their races. A tradition is that the first time a groom's horse wins a race, the groom gets to join the winner's circle group for a photo.



Mitch, with the winning horse, Sudden Draft

After a stint in the military, Mitch moved to Michigan in the late 1970s. He and his wife live in Portage and have two sons, one in Northern California and the other in Kansas.

There's no question that Gunny is Mitch's best horse friend at Cheff. They are often paired in therapeutic riding classes and make a great team. Gunny can be independent minded, but it's all relative when you compare his temperament to the young racehorses Mitch previously handled. In addition to PT, Mitch has worked with the Kambly group, veterans' classes, and the Silver Saddles senior riders, among others. All added up, he's probably put in enough steps to wear out multiple Fitbits.

## **Volunteering**

What are their favorite things about volunteering at Cheff? Rene and Mitch each talk about seeing the progress that individuals make in both PT and therapeutic riding and how meaningful that is. They've observed a non-verbal PT patient speak or sing after a single session, an experience other volunteers have also mentioned.

Working with veterans has been special to Mitch, a veteran himself. He noted that while horses drew his attention to Cheff, the satisfaction of knowing and working with the patients and clients is something you really feel good about. Rene mentioned a belief that many of us likely share – that we are all called to serve in some way and that you serve to help others, but often find you are getting even more back yourself.

Thank you, Rene and Mitch, for your excellent and amazing service to Cheff. We look forward to getting back to seeing you each week!

### ***Cheff's Physical Therapy Program and Team***

*Many Cheff volunteers are involved with the therapeutic riding program and may have only observed or heard about the physical therapy team and program. For those who are curious, here's a little more about PT at Cheff.*

*Our PT team is led by physical therapist Char Swain. Team members are: Lauren Crabb, PT assistant; Sarah Pizzie, equine professional and horse handler; Jake O'Brien, equine assistant; volunteers Rene Saar and Mitch Joffe; and PT horses Harvey, Emma, Killian and Tina.*

*The team works with patients individually and typically holds several sessions on Tuesdays and Fridays when Cheff is operating on a normal schedule. Patient ages have ranged from 11 months to 80+ years. Since the team is a small, consistent group, they have been able to continue some PT sessions during parts of the COVID-19 shutdown.*

*You may have noticed the team at work in the arena -- typically horse handler Sarah drives the horse from behind using long lines, managing the movement of the horse based on direction from the physical therapist and the patient's response to the horse's movement. The volunteers assist in various ways – helping with manipulative functions like ball throwing and reaching for toys, sometimes sidewalking, etc. Physical therapist Char sidewalks to facilitate a patient's response and may also step back to observe from various angles.*

*A couple key differences between PT sessions and therapeutic riding are the types of goals developed and the activities used to reach those goals.*

*In PT, a licensed physical therapist like Char designs a treatment plan that uses horse movement as one of perhaps several treatment tools. The patient's goals are all PT based, such as improved mobility, balance, and core strength. The PT patient is working on those goals through movement and varying positions on the horse as opposed to learning to ride.*

*Contrast that with therapeutic riding, where a certified therapeutic riding instructor, like our Cheff instructors, teaches riding skills. They identify goals for each client that are based in riding and horsemanship, such as stopping your horse or steering to weave a line of poles. An interesting link is that many times a patient will move on to therapeutic riding after completing PT goals.*

*The above is just the tip of the iceberg on PT at Cheff. There is much more info available on the use of a horse's unique movement as a treatment strategy in PT and in other fields such as occupational therapy and speech therapy. When we are back to a regular schedule at Cheff, please feel free to talk to Char or any Cheff instructor for more info.*

## Horse of the Month: AWESOME



Ask anyone who the sweetest and gentlest horse in the Cheff herd is, and they will probably say, "Awesome"!

Awesome is a 21-year-old Solid American Paint horse, who at 16.1 hands and 1100 pounds (well, maybe a little bit more now due to just eating) isn't too big or too small and is one of the most versatile horses for Cheff riders.

Awesome belonged to a lovely young woman who previously did an internship at Cheff. She saw the great work being done, loved the program and decided to donate him to Cheff. Prior to being on Cheff's staff, Awesome was used as an all-around horse being shown and trail ridden.

Awesome has been at Cheff the third longest out of the entire herd. Therapeutic Riding horses usually last in the industry only about 3-4 years due to the emotional/physical strain that is put on them and he has been here going on 7 years!

Awesome has what we call 'The Awesome Face'. It's that look he gets when he isn't quite sure what's going on and gets a little nervous: head up, eyes very large and ears somewhat back. Awesome dislikes the lift, loud music and a tight grip on his reins or lead rope.

What Awesome loves is a leader that is very calm and soft, and his favorite thing to do is go trail riding. His favorite treat is a concoction of homemade oatmeal, molasses and peppermint all put together to make a delicious cookie!

Awesome is one of the kindest horses in the herd and gets along with pretty much everyone. His gang that he hangs with includes Winston, Killian and Art.

Awesome is getting older now, and with getting older comes arthritis. He sure could use some joint supplements (if interested in donating, please contact Emily and she will guide you in the correct direction) or a Back on Track All Purpose saddle pad.

When we're all back at Cheff again, please make sure to stop by Awesome's stall and give some love to one of the most "Awesomest" horses at Cheff!



## March Fun Fact

When measuring a horse, you use the top of the withers because the distance from the withers to the ground remains the same. (As long as the horse is standing on level ground.) If the horse was measured from the top of the head, the height could change every time.



*“What does riding horses  
give us? An escape from  
the world. Exercise in  
fresh air.  
Adrenaline rushes.  
Healing through the  
bond.”*

*Unknown*



Many years ago, when men and women would come back from a war and showed signs of stress, had nightmares, flashbacks or other symptoms, people would say they were “Shell Shocked” or were experiencing “Combat Fatigue”. Now we know that as **Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**, a mental health problem that some people develop after experiencing or witnessing a life-threatening event like combat, a natural disaster, an accident, an assault, or any other experience that may affect their sense of safety and/or stability.

People who suffer from PTSD may have a variety of symptoms which include, but are not limited to:

1. **Intrusion** - A person may have intrusive thoughts such as nightmares, flashbacks (feeling like they are going through the event again), or may be “triggered” by a smell, sound or vision that causes them to relive the event.
2. **Avoidance** - People may try to avoid situations or people that trigger the memories of the event or may refuse to talk about it at all. (For example, a survivor of a traumatic car accident may refuse to drive a car). They may keep themselves very busy or avoid seeking help, so they do not have to think or talk about the event.
3. **Alterations in cognition and mood** - Some people suffering from PTSD may believe that they cannot trust anyone. They may not have loving or positive feelings towards other people and therefore avoid relationships. They may forget about parts of the trauma or not be able to talk about it at all.
4. **Alterations in arousal and reactivity** - People who have experienced trauma may be jittery or alert in their surroundings, always on the lookout for danger. They may be irritable and react with anger or have outbursts of rage. Anger is a very common issue with PTSD and may become the person’s first reaction to any kind of stress. Anger is a survival instinct—when we feel threatened, anger gives us energy (adrenaline) and may cause us to be hyper focused on a certain situation. People with PTSD often end up with anger as their default reaction to any stressful situation, whether major or minor. They may be especially sensitive to loud, sudden noises, or to the other extreme, very uneasy in situations of utter silence. They may engage in risk-taking behaviors, become aggressive, or even self-harm.

Many people who are exposed to trauma or a traumatic event may experience these symptoms, but if they last more than a month and/or cause significant distress or problems with the person’s functioning, that person may be diagnosed with PTSD. Symptoms may not appear immediately following the event, but often appear within 3 months of the event, and may last for months or sometimes years.

Other conditions that are often related to PTSD are:

1. **Depression** - Depression may occur after a traumatic incident and may affect a person’s daily functioning. If a person is depressed for more than several weeks, it is advised that they seek help from a doctor or mental health professional.
2. **Chronic pain** - Some chronic pain may be a direct result of a traumatic incident—an assault, an accident, natural disaster, etc. This may cause a person to suffer from chronic pain as well as PTSD. Sadly, the chronic pain may serve as a constant reminder of the trauma, which may cause the PTSD to become worse.
3. **Suicidal Ideation** - Symptoms of PTSD can become overwhelming, and this can put a person at a higher risk of suicide.

Men and women who serve or have served in the Military are probably what we (the general public) think of as the population most likely to suffer from PTSD. Many who experience PTSD may do so due to the combat they

have seen and/or experienced, the loss of a fellow soldier or group of people, or witnessing horrific events while serving. The job they performed while in war time may influence the symptoms and manifestation of PTSD as well—an infantryman who is on the front lines may experience much more stress than someone who is equally as important in the wartime effort but not necessarily on the front lines. What also may contribute to the stress are the politics and location of the war, and the enemy they face. (Up to 1/3 of all Vietnam Veterans experienced PTSD while the numbers are quite lower for those in the Gulf War, Operation Desert Storm, or other more recent wars).

Another factor in the Military that may lead to PTSD is Military Sexual Trauma (MST) which can happen during peacetime, training, or times of war.

Children who have experienced trauma may exhibit different PTSD symptoms than adults according to their age:

1. **Children under 6** may be upset if they are not near their parents, may act out the trauma through play, or may have sleeping troubles.
2. **Children 7-11** may also act out the trauma through play, drawings or stories, may display aggression or irritability, experience trouble sleeping or have nightmares, or may have trouble with school or friends.
3. **Children 12-18** tend to have symptoms more similar to adults. These may include one or more of the following: depression, anxiety, withdrawal, reckless behavior and/or substance abuse.

Events that may cause PTSD in children include (but are not limited to) neglect, physical abuse (witnessed or experienced), sexual abuse, and psychological abuse. Children who have been moved from home to home as in foster placements may also experience PTSD.

### **How is PTSD treated?**

Many people with PTSD may benefit from psychotherapy or counselling, with or without medications.

Trauma-focused psychotherapy focuses on the memories of the traumatic event and its meaning. There are several different methods of psychotherapy – Cognitive Processing Therapy, Prolonged Exposure, and Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing are only a few used with PTSD patients.

Medications often used are similar to those used for Depression—SSRI's (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors) and SNRI's (serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors) better known as anti-depressants.

### **How do horses help people with PTSD?**

Horses are prey animals, meaning they are hypersensitive to their surroundings until they feel that they are not in danger. Horses require humans to work to earn their trust (unlike dogs, who pretty much trust everyone until proven that they can't). Often, people with PTSD can appreciate and relate to the horses' hypervigilance as they also live in a similar state of hyper-awareness. Horses are acutely aware of body language and can recognize and react to anger, anxiety, fear or sadness in people that we may not see. Because they are action-based animals, they do not question a person's motives for the actions they take—they simply react to the action taken. When the horse reacts to the person, it allows the person to recognize what is or isn't working with the horse. This may help the person recognize behaviors or body language that are not resulting in the desired response from the horse and cause the person to change their thought and behavior patterns accordingly. As they recognize how the horse responds to their new approach, it often results in positive feelings of patience, love, respect, safety,



and empathy. The person can then apply these new thought patterns and behaviors to other relationships in their lives.

As they are learning their new communication and body language skills, they are also boosting their self-confidence and self-esteem as a result of working with a very large and powerful animal.

At the Cheff Center, we have worked with the local Veterans Administration to provide Equine Assisted Learning (EAL) classes for local veterans. EAL is defined by PATH International as “an experiential learning approach that promotes the development of life skills for educational, professional and personal goals through equine assisted activities”. The veterans worked with our horses mostly in ground programming—not necessarily riding, but it may entail grooming, leading a horse through a course in the arena, or other tasks devised by the instructor to reach a specific goal with each individual.

We hope in the future to work again with the VA and restart our Veterans program—it was not only beneficial to the veterans who came to work with the horses, but also very rewarding to the volunteers who were veterans themselves.

If you wish to learn more (and there is much, much more) about PTSD, the treatments and other information, you can go to the following websites which were sourced for this article:

- National Center for PTSD <https://www.ptsd.va.gov/>
- Mayo Clinic <https://www.mayoclinic.org/>
- PATH international <https://pathintl.org> (EAL information)
- Equine Therapy Group <https://www.equinetherapygroup.com/>





## March Birthdays

Doreen B  
Patricia D  
Holly E  
Saadya H  
Mitchell J  
Sydney L  
Preston P  
Tyler S  
Kelsie W

Samantha C  
Maya D  
Leesa H  
Leora HP  
Carrie K  
Stephanie N  
Megan P  
Jane S  
Olivia W

Josh C  
Mary E  
Susan H  
Cassidy H  
Beth L  
Patricia P  
Andrew P  
Justin VB

Make sure to check out the Cheff Facebook page! You'll get updates on Cheff reopening and programs, along with videos with T&T's helpful mental health tips.

[Click for latest update](#)



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Please remember that when you order online from **Amazon.com**, the Cheff Center can receive benefits when you do. Go to [smile.amazon.com](https://smile.amazon.com) and register—we are one of the 1000s of Charities that you can choose from, and we will get 0.5% of your qualified purchases!

To find out more, visit: <https://smile.amazon.com/gp/chpf/about>

And if you really want to help, ask your friends and family to do the same. We thank you in advance, as every penny counts for us, especially at this time.

## Harding's

For those of you who shop at Harding's, if you join their Community Rewards program and select the Cheff Center as your organization of choice, we will receive a rebate based on your purchase amounts. For more information, click on the link below.

<https://www.hardings.com/savings-and-rewards/community-rewards/>

Again, we thank you in advance, and please let your friends and family know—every little bit helps!!!

## Questions/comments?

Please contact Sara Putney-Smith, Volunteer Administrator, [sara@cheffcenter.org](mailto:sara@cheffcenter.org)

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*If you have suggestions for future newsletters, or are interested in submitting articles, please contact Sara Putney-Smith.*

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