

The Story of Shay and Julia

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East Aurora's Lothlorien Therapeutic Riding Center (LTRC) 'Along for the Ride' with Veteran-Athlete at Invictus Games in Australia



For Las Vegas native Shay Hampton, MSgt USAF (Ret), his day at Lothlorien Therapeutic Riding Center (LTRC) in East Aurora began with introductions and discussions about setting boundaries and staying present. The day ended with Shay making a life-changing connection with a horse named Julia. A few months later, Shay was competing in Australia at the Invictus Games carrying a piece of LTRC and Julia with him!

Shay (pictured left) and his fellow Wounded Warrior Project® comrades were on a Project Odyssey® retreat. They arrived at LTRC on a cold morning this past January to participate in LTRC's Way of the Warrior Program, working with our amazing horses to learn how to heal and cope with emotional wounds. Exercises with the horses focused on teaching skills to access body awareness, defining personal space, understanding mutual respect and the power of intent. The group also learned about using respectful boundaries, connection through body language, and how to stay mentally and physically present.

Shay worked with Julia, a 21-year-old Thoroughbred mare (pictured right) generously leased to the program by Jude and Marley Jacobs of East Aurora. Their emotional bond was evident from the start. "Today I was able to experience emotional therapy!" Shay explains. "That beautiful horse was so gentle and patient with me, when she looked into my eyes it took everything in my being not to drop to my knees and cry! If that horse could talk, I swear she was saying, "It's okay. I forgive you and I understand. You're safe."



A few months later, Shay was chosen to represent the United States at the 2018 Invictus Games in Australia in swimming, cycling, and rowing and he also carried the torch at the Opening Ceremonies.

That is when it became evident how much of an impression Julia and LTRC had made on Shay. He carries the flag of a fallen comrade with him everywhere he goes. He brought that flag with him to Australia, but not before placing the names of all the people, places and animals that had changed his life. LTRC and Julia were among the names on the flag. And before he left, LTRC sent Shay a key chain made out of hair from Julia's tail as a good luck charm which Shay says 'was on my backpack and went everywhere with me!' Shay won Gold and Silver at the Games.



LTRC is proud to be a part of Shay's journey. The program take-away has far reaching applications that are linked to increased success in personal life, relationships, parenting skills and career objectives. Shay may have summed up the program's effect best after spending the day with Julia:

"I don't know if anyone will ever believe me, but it doesn't matter, I know what I saw and felt, and what I am still feeling! I have never felt compassion like that until today! All I could do was tell her "Thank You!" That horse shook the core of my foundation, for the better! I am at a place in my life in search of the next chapter... I think I may have found it!" - Shay Hampton, MSgt USAF (Ret)

