

Working with horses helped her find her voice. She's helping other young women in Utah do the same.

This is part of a series of interviews with young Utahns making a meaningful impact on their communities — and their own — mental health. Read more at [slttrib.com](https://www.slttrib.com).

Teen girls are experiencing record high levels of sadness, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report. Sarah Brown says equine-assisted learning could be a solution for some of her peers.

"I grew up riding horses, and they've taught me so much," Brown said. "And so it's kind of a blessing that I was able to come back to them and be able to share my love of horses with young girls who are navigating life's struggles."

Headquartered in Alpine, Utah — but with locations as far as Ukraine and the Netherlands — Bridle Up Hope reports that more than 2,000 young women have gone through the program.

Brown, who works as an executive assistant and riding instructor to students who are between the ages of 12 and 18, says that caring for a horse — combined with Stephen R. Covey's book "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People" — can help make "shy, maybe very timid" young women who might be struggling with mental health challenges into "confident, beautiful beings."

She spoke with The Tribune about how riding and caring for horses can improve mental health outcomes for young women. This Q&A with her has been edited for length and clarity.

UTAH VOICES

The Salt Lake Tribune



Sarah Brown Brown works as an executive assistant and riding instructor at Bridle Up Hope.

Sara Weber: What kind of mental health work do you and your peers do at Bridle Up Hope?

Sarah Brown: I think naturally, as women, we have a lot of anxiety and there is a lot of expectation. More than half of our participants who come here are struggling with self worth and confidence. It's a beautiful thing to pair a young girl or a woman with a horse, a 1,200 pound animal. That is intimidating.

Then you are able to find your voice when you're working with this horse and build a connection with them. Horses see you as you are, they don't see you as someone you need to be or someone who you were in your life, they see where you're at right now.

And where do the "7 Habits" come into all this?

Habit one is to be proactive. Take charge of your life, take charge of your horse. So

we talk to our participants about recognizing what is within their control. And when you're working with a horse, you have to be confident and you have to hold yourself tall, you have to use your voice.

The horses are 1,200-pound object lessons to implement those habits into your life.

What challenges do you face in your day-to-day work?

We have 12 locations around the world. And I would say almost every single one of our locations has a waitlist right now. The greatest struggle that we're facing right now as a company, I would say, is to have enough time to be able to reach every girl and every student.

Do you think this need for mental health help is unique to Utah or young people?

Nowadays, especially after COVID-19, when the whole world was isolated, we've seen a significant increase in mental health struggles, especially in our participants here at Bridle Up Hope. I would say the younger generations definitely need support now more than ever, but also women.

What advice do you have for other young adults who are looking to help improve their peers' mental health?

There's power in vulnerability. I have seen a significant impact when somebody can be vulnerable and share their struggles.

Getting involved in the mental health world, it's so important to be helping yourself. For all of our employees here at Bridle Up Hope, when we interview them, we ask, "How are you sharpening your saw every day?" which is Stephen R. Covey's seventh habit. It's so important to be able to help yourself before you're helping others.

Secure storage of all guns will reduce suicide. As a doctor, I've seen it work.

It's not easy being an adolescent suicidologist in Utah, let alone in the United States.

Suicide deaths reached a record-high in America during 2022 with many rural and western states, including Utah, reporting higher rates than the rest of the country. This issue is not just about the numbers — it's about the young people and families impacted by the unexpected loss of a loved one when they die by suicide.

Over my 30 years of treating youth suicidality, I've experienced this tragedy far too often and felt the heartbreaking ripple effects. It affects not just your immediate circle, but also the greater community. We cannot accept this trend as the growing cultural norm.

Suicide is complex, but also preventable. Access, availability and acceptability of mental health care remain serious barriers for people in rural communities, and youth in Utah are no exception. The leading method of suicide overall is by firearm, and rural youth report having easy access to firearms at twice the rate as their urban peers. Firearm availability has direct effects on suicide rates, which is why secure storage is so important. In a large published study, states with higher rates of gun ownership, several of which were rural and/or in the Rocky Mountain West, experienced higher rates of suicide because of disproportionately higher numbers of firearm suicides. The differences were not accounted for by other factors such as higher rates of attempts or mental health ailments.



KURT MICHAEL

Several other suicide trends are worth exploring as we work to address this issue: 1) three-quarters of suicides occur at home; 2) among youth firearm suicides, 80% of those firearms are owned by parents or family members; and 3) when a firearm is used in a suicide attempt, it is fatal 90% of the time. In a moment of acute distress, access to lethal means, or the lack thereof, might be the difference between life and death.

Firearm suicides are at levels not seen since the mid-1990s and firearms were the leading cause of death (suicide and homicide combined) for American youth in 2022. Despite these discouraging facts, the good news is that more than 90% of those who make serious attempts and survive do not die by suicide at a later date.

The most sensible way to reduce suicides in Utah — and nationwide — is to invest in lethal means safety. However, many clinicians are hesitant to talk with their patients about the secure storage of firearms and medications, are skeptical that bringing it up will make any difference and

are not adequately trained in lethal means counseling. There are culturally-affirming ways to have these conversations, and doing so can make a difference. These discussions must be empathy-based, respectful of a family's way of life, collaborative and honest.

One story that sticks out is that of a struggling Utah teenager, whose father felt strongly about keeping his guns in the house as a way to protect his family. Implementing suicide-focused treatment in these settings requires addressing prevalent misconceptions, mainly that hospitalization is the norm and clinicians want all households to be gun-free. The evidence suggests that neither of these approaches is necessary. For this family, the tangible safety plan included storing the father's firearms more securely, including using a small biometric gun safe for his self-defense firearm instead of keeping it under his pillow.

The work I did with this family was an example of one of the most well-established approaches to lethal means safety. Counseling on Access to Lethal Means (CALM). Practicing CALM involves having honest conversations about practical and non-controversial approaches to preventing suicide, including the voluntary and secure storage of firearms and dangerous medications. CALM also includes disseminating objective information about safely storing guns and medicines — both over-the-counter and prescription.



Gun safety and suicide prevention brochures are on display next to guns for sale at a retail gun store in Colorado.

Utah has invested deeply in practices like CALM. In fact, Utah's HB 481, which I helped draft alongside state leaders and mental health professionals, was signed into law by Governor Spencer Cox in 2023 and requires K-12 school professionals to share information about safe storage with parents and families whose children are at risk of suicide. This landmark evidence-based legislation was vetted by CALM and is now part of the Suicide Prevention Resource Center's Best Practices Registry.

Utah is ahead of the rest of the country in suicide prevention after passing sensible legislation that promotes voluntary secure storage of firearms and dangerous medications. However, the hard work is only just beginning. The legislation has opened the door, yet the ultimate goal is to promote behavior change. We need to encourage more Utahns to store all of their firearms and dangerous

medications securely as a tangible way to reduce suicide risk among their loved ones.

Kurt Michael, Ph.D., is senior clinical director at The Jed Foundation (JED), a leading national nonprofit that protects emotional health and prevents suicides for teens and young adults. Dr. Michael is a clinical psychologist who specializes in rural school mental health and adolescent suicidology. He works with schools and communities to evaluate, adapt, and implement suicide prevention and postvention policies and practices as well as working with families to store their firearms and medications more safely to reduce the risk of suicide. Dr. Michael is a retired psychology professor, associate editor of the Journal of Rural Mental Health, frequent contributor to numerous school mental health publications, and enjoys outdoor adventure sports with his family when home in Utah's Wasatch Mountains.

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