

"Showing horses America made for the men and women who made America!"

NC State Championship

Goes Outside the Box for a new Vision

BY BOB FUNKHOUSER



"What we wanted to do was find a way to give back. We need to fill our stands and to help do so we wanted to affiliate with an organization we would be proud of," explained UPHA Chapter 12 co-chair Matt Shiflet. "Last year we gave money to Hurricane Relief and that was certainly needed, but Chad [Graham] and I had been talking about a possible partnership with his grandfather's foundation and we thought this would be a great organization to partner with.

"It would do two things: honor the Gold Star families and open it up for more people to enjoy our horses. It will shine an awesome light on our breed and our trainers. Exhibitors will be able to purchase a Gold Star and ride for a family or fallen hero.

"We have so much history with our show, I think this will be a perfect next chapter. We want to have a no stress, no hassle horse show where you put on your riding suit and go to the ring and now we can go to the ring with a lot of pride by doing something for families that really deserve it."

Chad Graham comes from a horse family, he himself a longtime exhibitor who spent several years working professionally as an aspiring trainer. He and brother Todd Graham became a part of the horse business because of their grandfather Hershel "Woody" Williams. Many of us recognize Williams as the face of Gold Star families for the United States. We see him doing such

things as the coin toss for the Super Bowl or on the news when something related to Gold Star families is being dedicated.

Williams received the military's highest decoration for valor – the Medal of Honor – for heroism above and beyond the call of duty during the battle of Iwo Jima in World War II. He was presented the award by President Harry Truman.

The Hershel "Woody" Williams Medal of Honor Foundation is a charitable 501(c)3 nonprofit organization that pursues the vision of Medal of Honor recipient Hershel "Woody" Williams to establish Gold Star Families Memorial Monuments in communities throughout the country, sponsor Gold Star Family outreach programs, provide Living Legacy scholarships to eligible Gold Star Children, and to advocate for educational benefits for all Gold Star Family members.

The impact of the Foundation's work helps to raise awareness about Gold Star Families' enduring sacrifice and the ultimate sacrifice made by their loved one. The Foundation wishes to educate the community about the sacrifices, reminding us all that freedom has not been and is not free.

"I remember riding down the highway with my grandfather, sharing something about horses and he would say, 'We can do what we do because someone made a sacrifice.' He used those moments as teaching opportunities," said Chad Graham. "We are all so connected because of this. It is the fabric of who we are. We are all family but it is the Gold Star families who have sacrificed the most. They are a reflection of the heritage of our country, part of our identity.

"He told me he accepted the Medal of Honor on behalf of the two marines that lost their life protecting his. Those that don't come back are now a part of our fabric. Later, through the Veterans Administration he had connections working with the Gold Star Families.

"Our country hasn't collectively done anything with those families," added Graham. "Our Foundation started with a monument program and once that first monument was dedicated in

West Virginia, we saw the impact it had. Seeing Gold Star families touch the monument and say, 'Thank you,' has a powerful impact. We should be the ones saying, 'Thank you!'

"These monuments mean their loved one will never be forgotten. We currently have monuments in 45 states and Guam. We have 60 projects dedicated to date and another 68 in progress.

"Our horses have the honor of becoming a part of this, a change agent for communities. This provides a place where Gold Star Families can come together and see the support of a community. We can come together to use the breed as a platform to help others. We have done ball games to help promote the Foundation and then Matt [Shiflet] and I got to talking about how we can partner this with horse shows. Someone sacrificed their life for us to be able to do this. It is a privilege to be able to show horses.

"My grandfather's favorite saying is, 'The cause is greater than I.' This partnership gives us all an opportunity to be a part of something greater than us. Bringing the Gold Star Families out to the shows as well as the general public does so many things, including getting those Families together for support and it gets vets involved with Gold Star Families. The impact on Gold Star Families is consistent...it is a simple act of remembering."

So, this fall, exhibitors at the September 16-19 North Carolina State Championship in Raleigh will be a part of something greater than themselves. While we already ride and drive with so much pride, can you imagine adding the element of helping Gold Star Families? As Graham said, this is apolitical and unifying. And at the heart of it all, the show horses and ponies will be the bond that makes this partnership work.

For more information on the partnership of the North Carolina State Championship Horse Show and the Hershel "Woody" Williams Medal of Honor Foundation contact show manager Peyton Hamilton at ephamiltonasb@gmail.com or call 803-431-1991.