

## ARTS &amp; CULTURE

## This Year, the Briscoe's Pony Express Will Make a Stop at Brooke Army Medical Center



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COURTESY / BRISCOE WESTERN ART MUSEUM

The Briscoe Western Art Museum's Pony Express will deliver personalized Valentine's Day letters to soldiers in recovery at Brooke Army Medical Center.

Over the past two weeks, and for the sixth straight year, the Briscoe Western Art Museum ran its whimsically kind-hearted and optimistic Valentine's Day-focused program Pony Express Love Letters, a nod to the briefly operational Old West mail system.

The initiative invited museum visitors to compose a love letter or Valentine's Day card for a special someone, using appropriately vintage-style implements the Western art and culture museum provided: antique typewriters, calligraphy pens, and special paper. The Briscoe even arranged for the San Antonio Calligraphers' Guild to hand-inscribe addresses and names on envelopes for those looking for the added flair that only a trained hand can provide.

On Valentine's Day, the letters destined for the downtown area will be hand-delivered, while those heading outside of downtown will be mailed out (at the museum's expense) with a special Pony Express commemorative stamp.

In a time when digital communication has largely replaced bygone modes of personal correspondence, the slow and deliberate practice of hand-writing a letter can serve a reflective and meditative purpose while simultaneously reminding us that we aren't that far removed from the old Pony Express days. In this way, Pony Express Love Letters can help visitors feel more connected to the people and times that form the bedrock of the Briscoe's collection.

This year, the Briscoe has partnered with Brooke Army Medical Center (BAMC) to extend Valentine's Day cheer to ailing soldiers. As folks have visited the designated letter-writing area at the Briscoe, they have had the option to address one or more of their letters to a BAMC patient. A delegation from the museum is scheduled to deliver the special BAMC letters on Wednesday.

Meredith Balzen, the Briscoe's marketing coordinator and the originator of the idea to send the Pony Express to BAMC, told the *Rivard Report* that she and other organizers "felt like this was a wonderful way to make the connection between San Antonio's identity as Military City, USA, and [our] institution."

"I feel like people seek opportunities to do good," Balzen said, "and this is a convenient way that they can do just that."

Balzen explained that the BAMC Love Letters concept to her felt like "a pure thing that allows people to spread the love in a world that seems increasingly unhappy."

She also noted that the initiative, which began with the goal of 50 to 100 letters specifically designated for BAMC patients, seemed to resonate with visitors. "We have had people come here specifically to seek this out," she said.

Kristen Mancillas, education and programs manager for the Briscoe, cited Pony Express Love Letters as "one of [the museum's] most popular programs."

"I'm thrilled to focus on uplifting the military community," she said of the BAMC connection. "I don't have a personal connection to the military, but I have come to understand its great importance to the character of San Antonio and am happy to show service members that we care about them."

Elaine Sanchez, BAMC's communications division chief said the plan was to "distribute about two letters to each floor."

"The nurses will share the letters and cards with all inpatients and staff," Sanchez said, "to ensure everyone has a part in this wonderful effort to support our military families."

The Briscoe collected at least 75 BAMC-bound letters.

"We are always very grateful and appreciative of the tremendous community support that we receive from Military City, USA," Sanchez said. "These letters and cards will be a bright spot for our patients and staff on Valentine's Day and a reminder of how much our community cares."