



The Need We Fill

When you close your eyes and dream of the future, what do you see? When you were younger, you might have wished for a new toy or a pet. Maybe as you got older, you dreamed of things like a car or a vacation.

Humans dream. But while some of us have dreams involving tangible things that can be bought in a store, others' dreams are much harder to fulfill. You can't exactly walk into the grocery store to buy balance and coordination. You can't stroll into the local hardware store and find the ability to walk independently or be comfortable with social interaction.

There are many kinds of therapy to help fulfill those kinds of dreams. However, many people don't know that therapeutic riding is one of them. It helps people become stronger, healthier and more independent while having fun.

Imagine the smiles as people of all ages and abilities come to a farm instead of a medical building to work on their dreams. When the car door opens, gentle breezes carry the scent of fresh-mown hay and the sound of happy laughter. The birds chatter and the horses nicker, while the cats soak up sun and purr their greetings. A kiss on a horse's nose transforms therapy into happiness.

We collaborate with other therapy providers to achieve goals for each patient. We just happen to do our work on a serene farm immersed in natural beauty instead of in a clinical environment. Make no mistake...equine therapy is still therapy. But it's therapy disguised as fun. The Equest Center makes therapy enjoyable for people with physical, mental, social and emotional disabilities while building strength, capability and purpose. We're leveraging strengths to overcome weaknesses and the riders don't even realize it's happening.

The Science of What We Do

When you hear the words "equine therapy," you might think that's just a fancy word for pony rides. Nothing could be further from the truth!

Equine therapy is a proven treatment option backed by science and validated by research. The pelvic movement of a horse directly mimics the pelvic movement of a human at a walk. Thus, the simple act of being on a horse helps train the brain on how the body is supposed to move. Riders at the Equest Center improve balance, muscle strength, coordination, flexibility, joint movement and motor skills. They form relationships, improve speech, follow directions, pay attention, and learn to manage sensory responses. And they do this all under the guidance of instructors who are certified by the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH Int'l), which is a credentialing agency.

Here's an example. Aubrey is a 4-year old girl who has been diagnosed with cerebral palsy. When Aubrey comes to class, her teachers ask her to tickle the horse's ears while she's riding, and fly like a butterfly. That's physical therapy...she's building body control. They tell her to look for the snowman in the arena and when she gets to it, to stop her horse by saying the word "Whoa." That simple request has Aubrey working on visual tracking, memory, and speech. These are simple but essential skills. And on a horse, it doesn't seem like work!

There's plenty of science if you want more, but the bottom line is this: equine therapy delivers benefits for people of all ages with physical, cognitive, emotional, social and psychological disabilities. It's serious therapy.

What We Accomplish

So what can equine therapy/therapeutic riding do for patients and riders?

First, therapeutic riding **improves independence**. Two-year-old Clara transformed her future through riding. She was unable to walk when she began at Equest and had no diagnosis as to why or what next. She started in the therapeutic riding program and gained enough mobility to start using a walker. A short time later, she was racing around the farm independently on her own two little legs. Grace, an older teen with autism, was too terrified to walk through the door without her mom a year ago. Now she's riding in horse shows, developing time management skills, and becoming more adept at meeting new people. She says in wonder, "I even made a real friend!" Aubrey, like so many other riders, is a different and better person because she comes here. She is confident, happy and driven. The stories never stop. Equine therapy helps riders achieve goals that contribute to independence, movement, communication and confidence. All of these accomplishments foretell a better life for the riders and for their families.

Second, the riders at Equest Center **develop a positive self-image**. Kids who have special needs are used to being noticed first for their disabilities. Adults are even more aware that they are being judged. But Equest Center focuses on seeing ability first. We emphasize the value of each person. We embrace the individual. Riders who come here feel like they belong. They feel normal. That is a profoundly different experience for them. They very quickly develop pride of ownership..."This is 'my horse' and I take care of it." An 8-year old boy is painfully honest when he says, "I feel in control when I ride, so I guess that's one of the good sides of my autism. I never really found any before."

And third, the Equest Center **creates a network of caring**. As one volunteer somewhat sheepishly noted, "I came for the horses and stayed for the people." Volunteers, parents and riders are all bound together by shared need. "We put on strong faces so our little ones don't worry," says one parent. "But we get tired, too." That's the beautiful thing about the Equest Center family. Everyone understands each other's challenges and pain. Parents can network with each other and get advice from those who have been where they are. Just being at the Center is a respite for them. Having a safe place to bring their kids means there's no judging. No staring. Only kind words, support, and the reassurance that you can go on.

The volunteers are a huge part of the support structure. Volunteers gave more than 55,900 hours to Equest Center last year! Many of the parents also volunteer, taking on "honey-do" list items while their children are riding. One father reflects, "It's my way of giving back for what they have done for my daughter. I can't do it for her, but they can." Even the horses are part of the team. Adults and children connect to them in heartbreakingly simple ways. One young girl was overheard whispering to her horse, "Joey, pray for me. I'm going to Boston tomorrow [for a medical procedure]." So whether it's a hand on the shoulder, kind words of encouragement, or a horse's warm muzzle tickling your neck, they know they are not alone and there will be better days.

What is Changing?

Our first challenge — a good one to have — is that demand for our services is growing. The Equest Center opened with 16 riders and 7 acres in 1990. Now, over 32 years later, we serve more than 185 students each week on a farm that fills 35 acres. It is the only year-round therapeutic riding center in this area. Requests continue to pour in for expanded therapy options to meet the needs created by community budget cuts. Individuals who are unable to sit astride a horse could benefit from other horse-related treatments if we made them available. There's always a waiting list.

This farm, like any other, requires constant maintenance. If you've ever spent time on a farm, you know the chores never end. There's feeding and mucking out stalls; painting fences and mowing trails. We go through a lot of hay and move a lot of manure for 34 horses! That requires vehicles and people and money for upkeep. Our facilities must be updated and maintained regularly and efficiently to provide a safe environment and experience for clients, staff and our horses (our equine therapists).

Financial demands to care for those with disabilities are increasing. We never turn anyone away due to inability to pay for our services. The reality is that many of our families experience unemployment, loss of insurance, benefits and rising health costs which can impact all aspects of treatment. The medical bills and extra costs for someone with special needs can be staggering. Scholarship dollars are essential.

And finally, it is critical that we run as efficiently as possible in all areas of operations as every dollar saved can provide additional funding for our clients in need.

Our Solutions

Our solution to these changing and growing needs involves three components. The first is a significant ***investment in capital improvements*** that will improve our efficiency and reduce operating costs. For example, we must finish updating our miles of wooden fences (that require painting and much repair) with low-maintenance, pre-coated flex fencing. We need a dump trailer so we can stop paying other people to take away horse manure, and a hay storage barn so we can buy hay in-season at a lower cost and store it. These and other investments will help us reduce our dependence on expensive outsourced services, improve safety and make us more efficient.

The second components relate to ***serving more people***. Equine Therapy Scholarships are essential for so many of our clients. This campaign includes \$1 million in scholarship funds. The earnings from the scholarship fund will provide at least \$3,500 each month for scholarships. That increase in scholarship money will give more students the life-changing benefit of equine therapy.

Construction of a new ADA Accessible Administrative Building to provide workspace, private meeting rooms for client consultations, large conference room for Veteran's programming and continuing education for our Certified Instructors, complete kitchen facilities and ample room for our interns and volunteer crew. Our current administrative building is a double wide trailer that is in dire need of many in-depth repairs and suffering from being well-loved and well-used for over 32 years.

Construction of new Carriage and Hay Barn to house and operate a new adaptive carriage driving program (and store our hay purchased in season). This will serve students who cannot sit on a horse, or those who could benefit from additional skills that can be taught through driving instead of riding.

Construction of a pavillion to cover our outdoor arena. This will offer us a second place for sheltered riding (in addition to our indoor arena) and provide more scheduling flexibility to serve additional riders throughout the year.

We are also enhancing and expanding programming to meet the needs in our community! These include Special Equine Program tailored for the deaf and hard of hearing, programs for veterans, seniors, as well as additional vocational and job training for our students to help prepare them for meaningful work and increased independence.

Through all these efforts, we will double the capacity of riders we are able to serve.

And finally, we are focused on **sustainability**. Every incoming and outgoing dollar counts. We want to build our capacity for fundraising to engage more people in our work.

Equest Center for Therapeutic Riding is completely **debt free! 100% of funds raised will go toward scholarships, programming and capital projects in this campaign!**

Conclusion

It seems like a bit of an oxymoron to say that joy expresses itself through tears. But the tears flow at regular intervals here. One staff member notes, "Working here gives me the opportunity to see special human moments. We see humanity at its best. I could cry every day if I let myself."

The truth is that all of us have gaps in our lives. We all need reassurance. We all need to belong. It's easy to start feeling sorry for yourself when life becomes hard. But coming here changes things. One volunteer says, "You think your life is hard. Then you come here and you get perspective on what 'hard' really means. And then it's just an honor to help."

That help pays off for the riders and their families. Every scrap of independence...every new accomplishment, no matter how simple...provides something essential. "Equest Center gives us hope," says a parent. "Our daughter is five. We don't know how far she can go. But being here, we know we are giving her all the tools we can to let her be who she is going to be."

The Equest Center is a powerful beacon of hope and healing for children, families and adults. Now we have a chance to extend our reach and help more people discover the priceless joy of independence through equine therapy. We hope you will join us in our efforts!