Horses and at-risk youth: An alternative approach to reconnect adolescents

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HORSES AND AT-RISK YOUTH: AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO RECONNECT ADOLESCENTS

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ABSTRACT

In order to reach at-risk youth who have often become disengaged from school and mainstream society, educators need to develop alternative strategies to re-connect at-risk students. The purpose of this study was to determine if and how participating in a horse program can help change the attitudes, skills and behaviors of at-risk youth and, based on the gathered data, to subsequently develop a model outlining best practices.

The research design most appropriate for this study was a qualitative approach that explored the literature and experiences of youth participating in such programs. The methodology consisted of three phases: First, data was collected from three sources (literature, existing programs and expert interviews). Next, the data was analyzed and examined for recurring observations and themes. Several recurring themes emerged such as objectives of programs, the role of horses, setting and activities, and transference of learning. Lastly, the treated data was incorporated into a model that outlines the processes and best practices of an equine-facilitated program for at-risk youth. The findings of this study were encouraging and supported the hypothesis that equine-facilitated programs can be an effective intervention strategy for at-risk youth.
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DEDICATION

In loving memory of my mother, Anna-Maria Gessner, who always reminded me to believe in myself and persevere no matter what.

I would also like to dedicate this project to all the four- and two-legged creatures who inspired and supported this journey in ways too numerous to mention. Without them, the following pages would be blank...
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Students considered “at-risk” are typically characterized by low academic achievement and behavioral issues which jeopardize their success in school. They are “at-risk” of not reaching their full potential and/or dropping out of school. For some, school failure has become the norm, not an exception. These students have often become disengaged and have become alienated from school, making it difficult for teachers to reach them. Educators frequently realize that remedial instruction, asking the students to “try harder”, or “more of the same”, is not an effective strategy for these students. In addition, individual and social risk factors such as truancy, delinquency, drug and alcohol use, gang involvement and learning disabilities contribute to at-risk youth’ disengagement from the mainstream population.

General Statement of the Problem

In order to re-engage these adolescents, educators need to consider the “bigger picture” and look at the whole person who comes with human needs, emotions and attitudes. We cannot teach a student effectively if the
student sees the instruction as meaningless or worthless. The best lesson might not be the one in a textbook but one we use to instill self-confidence and self-worth. Within the context of traditional classroom instruction which focuses predominantly on teaching content, however, there is little room for teaching “life lessons” or skills. In order to do so, we might consider and develop alternative methods and programs to effectively meet the needs of at-risk, high-risk and delinquent students. A most basic task of education is to develop adolescents who can and want to succeed in school and, ultimately, in life.

Purpose and Research Questions of Study

The idea for this study came from personal experiences when I re-discovered horses after many years. Knowing what I know now, horses played an important role for me in getting through those difficult teenage years. Decades later, I experienced first-hand again that no matter how stressful my day had been, it all seemed to melt away when I went riding or just “hung out” with the horse I subsequently purchased. As a correctional educator who seeks to improve the lives and learning experiences of at-risk and delinquent youth, I understand the need for alternative approaches and began to wonder how at-risk
students could benefit from working with horses. A subsequent search of the literature revealed several programs that work with at-risk youth and horses, but there was little information about the nature of these activities or their effectiveness. Since equine-facilitated programs incorporate elements of outdoor experiential education, the findings of adventure-based programs were included in this study. The literature on outdoor experiential education supported the hypothesis that they can be an effective intervention strategy to address the needs and develop life skills of at-risk and delinquent youth (Berman & Berman-Davis, 1995; Clagett, 1989; Cross, 2002; Moote & Wodardski, 1997). Bruyere (2002) particularly concluded that outdoor experiential programs can be more effective for at-risk youth than conventional approaches. Likewise, Castellano and Soderstrom (1992) stated there was enough evidence to encourage the development of such non-traditional approaches, especially in the juvenile justice system.

As with any emerging field, there is a lack of research and scientific studies on the nature and effectiveness of equine-facilitated programs. For example, Rolandelli and Dunst (2003) concluded in their research synthesis that there is insufficient evidence to support
the effectiveness of such programs. There are, however, a few studies that report encouraging results. For example, a study by Cushing and Williams (1995) researched a program in which inmates trained wild mustangs and reported numerous benefits in areas such as self-esteem, autonomy, self-awareness and nurturing. Overall, they concluded that this program contributed to better emotional and psychological states of inmates and staff. Another study (Bizub, Joy, & Davidson, 2003) of the effects of therapeutic horseback riding reported positive results in the area of psychosocial growth. Although these results are encouraging, there is a definite need for further research to add validity to this field.

While there was sufficient anecdotal evidence and consensus that these programs "work", there are no research-based guidelines for implementing equine-facilitated programs. As a result, the purpose of this study is to develop a model that outlines the processes and best practices of an equine-facilitated program for at-risk youth. Guiding research questions for developing this model included: How can participating in a horse program affect and help change the attitudes, skills and behaviors of at-risk youth? What learning experiences can occur? What strategies are effective with at-risk
populations? In what type of setting, using what approaches?

Significance of Study

This study was designed with a dual purpose. First, it is intended to be informational since it is an attempt to reveal and consolidate knowledge about this emerging field. It contains a comprehensive review of the literature (which includes related fields such as outdoor experiential education and animal-assisted therapy), an examination of a variety of programs, and expert interviews. Second, it is intended to be instructional for others who contemplate implementing a horse program. The developed model outlines the processes and incorporates best practices of an equine-facilitated program for at-risk youth. It is based on the overall findings of this study and can serve as a guide to others.

Generally speaking, this study attempts to explore an alternative method to re-connect at-risk youth. Through the example of equine-facilitated programs, it reveals that many youth need to acquire a sense of competence and success, social integration and useful skills and knowledge in order to become a good student, employee or citizen. This study, therefore, also illustrates on a
broader scale how non-traditional approaches can teach important life skills that are the foundation for success in school.

Overview of Study

In this study, I have attempted to develop a model that outlines processes and incorporates best practices of an equine-facilitated program for at-risk youth. The research design most appropriate for this study was a qualitative approach that explores the literature and experiences of youth participating in horse programs. This model was developed as follows:

In chapter two I have reviewed the literature in several areas related to the research questions of this study. Since there is very little research on equine-facilitated programs, literature from related fields was also included. The first section of the literature review examines research findings of adventure-based outdoor education programs. The second section focuses on literature on human-animal interaction and the human-animal bond, while the third section takes a closer look at what makes working with horses different from using other animals.
Chapter three describes the different phases of the methodology implemented in this study. Phase I, data collection, consisted of collecting data from three different sources: The literature review, an examination of various horse programs, and expert interviews. In Phase II, data treatment, the collected data was compared and analyzed. It was then examined for recurring patterns and emerging categories and themes. Phase III consisted of the development of a model that outlines learning experiences and best practices for a horse program.

Chapter four, findings and results, consisted of the findings obtained by implementing the methodology. The results were categorized and recurring themes emerged. These themes and best practices were then incorporated into the proposed model which can serve as a guide for others to implement similar programs. Chapter five, conclusions and recommendations, gives a brief synopsis of this study and outlines its significance and limitations. In addition, the implications of this study are discussed and recommendations are made regarding future work and research in this field.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

There is nothing so good for the inside of a man as the outside of a horse.

*Proverb, early twentieth century*

Much of the literature on how interacting with and taking care of horses can benefit various populations relies on practice, anecdotal evidence and observation. While there seems to be an overall consensus that "something works", there is a lack of literature on theory and research. It is therefore necessary to review the literature of related fields to provide a conceptual framework for this study.

The first section of this review examines research findings of adventure-based outdoor education programs, particularly for at-risk and delinquent youth. These programs utilize the concept of experiential education where participants learn by doing, outside the traditional classroom environment. They are often used as an intervention strategy for at-risk adolescents and sufficient evidence exists to support their usefulness in
addressing the needs of troubled youth (Berman & Berman-Davis, 1995).

The second section focuses on human-animal interaction and the human-animal bond. This field has grown considerably during the past 30 years, and several disciplines have emerged within this area of study. The use of animals as therapeutic agents has gained considerable popularity with a variety of populations, including the elderly, mentally or physically disabled, various at-risk populations, and incarcerated individuals.

The third section takes a closer look at what makes working with horses different from using other animals. It also provides an overview of how horses are utilized in various programs, including hippotherapy and therapeutic riding, weekend riding camps, equine-facilitated psychotherapy, as well as horsemanship and 4-H programs.

Outdoor Education Programs

In contrast to traditional education where students learn curriculum in a formal environment, outdoor education programs take place in informal, natural environments which may be more attractive to students who have experienced previous school failure. Outdoor education encompasses a variety of programs including
wilderness camp programs and wilderness therapy, adventure-based programs, environmental and conservation education, and to a certain aspect, outdoor recreation (Lappin, 1984). All of these programs utilize the concept of experiential learning which has been defined by the Association for Experiential Learning as “a process through which a learner constructs knowledge, skill and value from direct experience” (cited by Berman & Davis-Berman, 2000, p. 1).

In their review of the literature concerning adventure-based programs, Moote and Wodarski (1997) concluded that the overall goal of adventure-based activities appeared to be enhancing the participants’ self-esteem and self-concept. Even though they pointed out that adventure-based approaches vary greatly in their implementation and that many studies have research design problems, they found that most studies indicate a positive impact on the participants’ self-esteem and self-concept. In addition, they noted that there is empirical support to suggest that adolescents can improve life skills in structured programs. Adventure-based programs include many components beneficial to the development of adolescents, such as “excitement, risk taking, cooperation and competition, trust, communication, physical, mental and

Since the 1970s, there has been a growing interest in outdoor experiential programs, particularly those aimed at youth who are in the juvenile court system or who have mental health problems (Berman & Davis-Berman, 1995). After conducting a multi-disciplinary review of the literature published in social work, criminal justice, psychology and outdoor education, Bruyere (2002) concluded that “outdoor programs fulfill a valuable role in the landscape of juvenile justice, prevention and offender rehabilitation”, and that they “diversify the alternatives through non-traditional and informal environments that may be more attractive to youth than more conventional approaches” (p. 207). Berman and Davis-Berman (1995) gave the following reasons for using outdoor programs over traditional methods: Staff and participants relate to each other in a physically active way where they do not rely solely on talk (which is often not effective for at-risk adolescents who resist talk or don’t trust authority figures). In addition, outdoor programs put youth in an unfamiliar setting where they are not so sure of
themselves, which can reduce defensiveness and facilitate relationships with staff leaders. Since many programs incorporate elements of risk, participants are also encouraged to move beyond their comfort zones and have opportunities to face their fears and issues. Finally, many programs foster interdependence among group members by using small-group activities.

Cross (2002) examined the effects of an adventure education program on perceptions of alienation and personal control among at-risk adolescents from an alternative high school. The program consisted of a five-day rock climbing experience which included the following aspects: Novel setting; cooperative, caring and trusting environment; problem solving opportunities; feelings of success and accomplishment; and time for processing and reflection. The findings supported that at-risk adolescents who participated in an outdoor intervention program showed significantly lower perceptions of alienation compared to the control group. In addition, they demonstrated significantly greater perceptions of self-control as compared to the control group. Unfortunately, his study did not explore specific sources of these changes. Cross (2002) does, however, discuss potential explanations of his findings. For
example, the rock climbing experience assured that participants felt that they were part of an important task in which each had adult roles and responsibilities. The adolescents' sense of belonging was nurtured which can explain the reduced perception of alienation. At the same time, participants' choices were under their own control, with each participant being accountable for their choices, while consequences were at times immediate.

The impacts of outdoor adventure programs on at-risk adolescents' self-perception was examined in a study by Garst, Scheider, and Baker (2001), using quantitative and qualitative methods. The results indicated that self-perception was affected by participating in the program; in addition, social acceptance and behavioral conduct increased immediately after participation with some behavioral changes remaining four months after completing the program. Garst, Scheider, and Baker concluded that the “catalysts for self-perception change appeared to be novelty and escape...therefore, outdoor adventure programs may have value because participants experience time away from the high-risk home environment, even if it is only for a few days” (p. 47). The results of this study further indicate that participating in an outdoor adventure program enhances social and behavioral
development. This evidence leads us to believe that prevention and intervention with at-risk youth does not always have to focus on "fixing" what we perceive as wrong; instead, our efforts can also concentrate on facilitating positive experiences as the foundation for further change.

The effectiveness of therapeutic wilderness programs for juvenile delinquents as an alternative to traditional placement has not been sufficiently researched (Castellano & Soderstrom, 1992). In their review of wilderness program evaluations, Castellano and Soderstrom (1992) found that "it would be premature to conclude that wilderness stress challenge programs have been shown to reduce the recidivism of program participants" (p. 23). However, their study of the effects of an Outward Bound type wilderness program indicated measurable positive effects on the recidivism of youth who successfully participated, lasting for about one year. After two years, however, the positive effects had disappeared. Castellano and Soderstrom concluded that "persuasive quasi-experimental evidence exists to encourage the continued development and examination of such programs as alternatives to traditional juvenile justice interventions" (p. 43). Even more encouraging results, although only measured
short-term, are reported by Clagett (1989) in his analysis of the methods and techniques utilized at the Hope Center Wilderness Camp, a residential placement facility for emotionally disturbed delinquent teens with an average stay of fourteen months. Two follow-up studies found that 85% of the campers who successfully completed the program did not recidivate during the initial six months after their release.

It appears that researchers agree that outdoor education programs are a promising approach to reengage at-risk adolescents and that "studies suggest generally positive results for outdoor programs for troubled teens" (Berman & Davis-Berman, 1995, p. 3). If we know what doesn't work, more time and resources should be devoted to pursuing alternative methods. Bruyere (2002) stated that "given that interventions should be diverse and included creative alternatives to engage youth for whom casework or traditional counseling is doubtful to be effective, outdoor programs may continue as a viable rehabilitation option" (p. 208). However, the reviewed literature generally indicates a need for reliable future research to evaluate potential benefits and the effectiveness of outdoor experiential education.
Human-animal Interaction

The idea of using animals for therapeutic and rehabilitative purposes is certainly not new. Its origin can be traced to the concept of the human-animal bond (HAB), a term first conveyed by pioneers such as Konrad Lorenz and Boris Levinson whose work greatly influenced the scientific community in the 1970s and 1980s, predominantly in the field of veterinary medicine (Hines, 2003). Hines pointed out that while this emerging field attempted to be interdisciplinary early on, it gained credibility and recognition through presentations at national and international interdisciplinary conferences and their subsequent proceedings. In 1985, Karen Miller Allen published the first annotated bibliography on the human-animal bond. Today, HAB is widely recognized and accepted, largely as a result of the media coverage on community programs which utilized pets as therapeutic agents. The Delta Society, an international organization established in 1977 in Portland, Oregon, has become a leading resource for the human-animal bond and the important role of animals for people's health and well-being. Professionals such as Phil Arkow of the Humane Society and Leo Bustad, a founder of the Delta Society, were among the first to take animals into nursing homes in
the late 70s and 80s. Since then, these early activities have evolved. After being originally referred to as pet therapy or pet-facilitated therapy (PFT), they were defined by the Delta Society as “animal-assisted activities” (AAA) and “animal-assisted therapy” (AAT) (Hines, 2003).

According to the Delta Society’s definitions, animal-assisted activities (AAA) are “goal-directed activities that improve a client’s quality of life through the use of the human-animal bond” (Granger & Kogan, 2000, p. 214), whereas animal-assisted therapy (AAT) is a “goal-directed intervention that utilizes the human-animal bond as an integral part of the treatment process” (p. 213). As with many other disciplines that are still in the early phases of professional development, there is no general agreement on how AAA or AAT is to be conducted. We find many variations, depending on setting and target population. A variety of animals are used, ranging from small animals such as birds, fish, rabbits, dogs and cats to larger animals such as horses and farm animals, even dolphins. Activities take place in a number of settings, including long-term care facilities, nursing homes, hospitals, schools, as well as institutional settings.
The first recorded use of AFT took place in 1792 at the York Retreat in England, an asylum run by a Quaker group, where common farm animals were used as part of the treatment and as an alternative to restraints and drugs (Beck, 2000). In 1867, Bethel was founded in Bielefeld, Germany, as a home for epileptics where animals were an integral part of treatment; today, Bethel has grown into a center of healing for the disadvantaged with more than 5,000 patients (Catanzaro, 2003). In the United States, the first well-documented use of animals for rehabilitative purposes took place in 1944 at the Army Air Force Convalescent Center in Pawling, New York, where dogs, horses and farm animals were used as a diversion from the intense therapeutic programs for airmen (Beck, 2000). In 1947, Green Chimneys, a 75-acre farm near Brewster, New York, was founded as a home for emotionally and mentally disabled children and adolescents by the Ross family. Still in operation today, Green Chimneys has expanded to over 160 acres and has become a social service agency which now serves children and adults from New York and surrounding regions. It is considered the strongest and most diverse of its kind involving farm, animal, plant and wildlife assisted activities where human-animal interactions have been an active component for over 50
year, despite many organizational changes (Mallon & Ross, 2000).

In 1975, David Lee pioneered the first successful animal therapy program in a U.S. prison at the Oakwood Forensic Center (formerly the Lima State Hospital for the Criminally Insane) in Lima, Ohio. Lee (1987) noticed an improvement in some men after they found an injured bird and smuggled it into the institution where they fed and cared for it in an attempt to save its life. Lee consequently initiated a 90-day experiment which exceeded all expectations. A study conducted at Lima in 1981 compared patients on a ward with pets to patients on a ward without pets. Lee reported that “the patients with pets needed half as much medication, had drastically reduced incidents of violence and had no suicide attempts during the year-long comparison” (p. 232). The “ward without pets had eight documented suicide attempts during the same year” (p. 232). At Lima, long-term patients keep their pets such as birds, hamsters, fish or other small animals living in their cells. Patients who stay for short terms before being returned to prison visit and work with farm animals such as deer, goats, ducks, geese and rabbits. Eight years after its inception, the program was using more than 170 pets and was considered highly
successful. Lee concluded that an institution can receive the following benefits from a therapeutic pet program:

"1. A comfortable atmosphere. 2. An improved sense of patient self-worth. 3. A necessary diversion. 4. Providing companionship" (p. 235). The underlying philosophy is to help patients help themselves. Lima began to train dogs for the Pilot Dog program (which provides free guide dogs for the blind) in 1996.

Cusack (1988) suggested in the early stages of the development of this field that "animals can be vitally important for the fringe groups of society; prisoners, the physically challenged, and the mentally ill" (p. 33). He further stressed that "perhaps most important, pets seem to bring out the best in us. If there is a capacity for affection, compassion, for empathy or tenderness overlooked by our human fellows, a pet has an uncanny ability to ferret it out" (p. 33). Similarly, Beck and Katcher (1983) concluded that "when people face real adversity...affection from a pet takes on new meaning. Then the pet’s continuing affection is a sign that the essence of the person has not been damaged" (p. 31). These conclusions support the idea that animal-assisted activities can positively affect at-risk and delinquent youth, perhaps as a first step towards healing and change.
One of the first programs that introduced dogs to incarcerated juveniles was started in 1993 at the Oregon Youth Authority’s McLaren Juvenile Correctional Facility. Project Pooch matches unwanted dogs with incarcerated youth who provide obedience training to prepare them for adoption as family pets in a program that uses human-animal interactions and emphasizes responsibility, patience, and compassion for all living things. It is one of the few programs where results were documented in a three-year study. The findings included considerable behavior improvement by students in the areas of respect for authority, social interaction and leadership; the youth who completed the program reported growth in the areas of honesty, empathy, nurturing, social growth, confidence and pride of accomplishment (Merriam-Arduini, 2000, cited by Strimple, 2003).

Positive effects of animal-assisted therapy to enhance patient care were also reported with adolescents hospitalized in a psychiatric unit for acute or chronic mental problems. Bardill and Hutchinson (1997) studied the effects of a dog residing on the unit and found that the adolescents responded positively. Their findings indicated that having a dog present greatly effected the hospital environment: It was perceived as more homelike and
friendly, as well as safe and protective. The dog often helped calm and deescalate highly emotional situations while also serving as friend and comforter, unconditionally accepting, as listener and distractor, catalyst for learning, even as therapist. Similar positive results were reported by Kogan, Granger, Fitchett, Helmer, and Young (1999) in their study on the effect of animal-assisted therapy sessions on children with emotional disorders, held at the participants' school: The children experienced positive growth in areas of appropriate behaviors, being in control of their environment, developing a sense of pride and accomplishment, as well as enhancing self-esteem. The study's findings support the use of AAT as "one example of an innovative program that promotes growth by allowing participants to engage in pro-social behaviors that may generalize to other settings" (p. 119). Likewise, Chandler (2001) concluded that "animal-assisted therapy and activity are useful modalities that can be easily incorporated into the counseling and school setting" (p. 4). Furthermore, "emotional connections made with animals can transfer to more empathic attitudes towards other persons" (p. 4).
The research on human-animal interaction and animal-assisted activities has confirmed that animals can play an important part in assisting humans to heal and change. The literature supporting animal-assisted activities and therapy for a variety of populations has been growing. Evidence suggests that the associated benefits can occur on psychological, behavioral, social and physical levels. However, researchers agree that while there have been a number of descriptive or hypothesis-generating studies, there are few hypothesis-testing studies with quantitative data (Catanzaro, 2003; Wilson & Barker, 2003; Mallon, 1992). Other concerns include small sample sizes, flawed methodology, and lack of control groups which may lead to the suggestion that there is inadequate evidence to support definite conclusions and generalization (Wilson & Barker, 2003). On the other hand, an abundance of anecdotal success stories and highly positive observations provide sufficient evidence to utilize animal-assisted activities and therapy as an alternative approach, even though "research activities on the human/companion animal bond and animal-facilitated therapy are in their infancy" (Mallon, 1992, p. 56). In order for this field to be widely recognized and accepted, however, carefully
controlled experiments and scientifically solid research is badly needed (Beck & Katcher, 2003).

Horses as Catalyst for Change

While using horses falls within the field of human-animal interaction or AAA or AAT programs, horses are unique in several aspects. First, their sheer size makes a difference since an animal that weighs on the average 1,000 pounds commands greater respect than a smaller animal, such as a dog, and might evoke fear in some. In addition, horses are prey animals by nature that rely heavily on their instincts when faced with a potential predator, such as a human. Gaining a horse’s trust and cooperation is typically more challenging than working with other animals, such as dogs. Yet, while there might be safety concerns that do not apply to the use of other animals, what makes working with horses truly unique is that they can be ridden. Within the field of AAA/AAT, "for the recipient...the horse offers a peak experience, perhaps unmatched by any other, with a totally unique physical experience while in a joyous social environment" (Hart, p. 94).

The positive physical effects of therapeutic riding for individuals with physical disabilities have been
widely recognized, largely because research has concentrated on studying its physical effects (Cawley, Cawley, & Retter, 1994). Measurable improvements have been reported in areas of posture, weight bearing, balance skills, mobility, strength and coordination. Several categories of using horses within therapeutic settings have emerged, such as hippotherapy, therapeutic riding, and vaulting. Hippotherapy, which literally means therapy with the help of a horse, refers to passive riding where the horse as a therapeutic "tool" moves the rider. The goal is not to teach riding skills, but to conduct physical therapy on horseback, with a physical therapist present; it "utilizes the movement of a horse to attain specific, predetermined therapeutic goals" (Rolandelli & Dunst, 2003, p. 1). Riding therapy, on the other hand, can be passive or active when the rider is allowed to lead the horse. Besides physiological areas, it can also target "...psychological or social problems...learning to control one's behavior is naturally taught...as the rider learns what behaviors result in positive responses from the horse" (Granger & Kogan, 2000, p. 217). The third category, vaulting, refers to gymnastic exercises on horseback and is used to prepare individuals for riding and as therapy for those with special needs. Because
another individual controls the horse’s direction and speed, the rider is free to focus on the body-to-body experience of rhythm, balance, and shared energy, making it ideal for beginning riders (Vidrine, Owen-Smith, & Faulkner, 2002).

Since the 1960s, therapeutic riding programs have spread across America. Since the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA) was established in 1969, affiliated programs have grown to over 550, with 3,200 individual members (NARHA, 1999). As the field developed, it has become apparent that benefits are not merely physical. When individuals with disabilities learn how to ride and control a horse, it creates feelings of accomplishment and pride, confidence and independence – they are in control, for perhaps the first time in their life. Learning how to ride and interact with a horse not only treats the body, but also the mind.

As the field of therapeutic riding began to give more attention to the psychological and emotional benefits, another category of animal-assisted therapy utilizing horses emerged: Equine-facilitated psychotherapy (EFP), also referred to as equine assisted psychotherapy (EAP). It is a field in which horses are used specifically as a tool for emotional growth and learning. The focus of EFP
is not on riding but rather involves setting up problem-solving activities with horses that take place on the ground, not on horseback. It is experiential; participants learn about themselves and others by participating in these activities, followed by discussing and processing feelings and behaviors. During these sessions, a licensed therapist as well as a horse professional are present. A subdivision of NARHA, the Equine-Facilitated Mental Health Association (EFMHA), was recently formed to provide guidelines and a common set of standards for providing equine-facilitated mental health services. This new field has created several centers across America, serving a wide variety of clients, ranging from at-risk adolescents to top-notch executive as well as those with psychiatric disabilities.

While many practitioners will readily attest to psychological and emotional benefits of therapeutic horse and riding programs, citing countless observations and anecdotal evidence, there is very little research on it. In addition, Rolandelli and Dunst (2003) concluded in their practice-based research synthesis that there is insufficient evidence to support claims about the effectiveness of hippotherapy with disabled children. While they found that most of the reviewed 13 studies
reported positive effects in the physical, social-emotional, or language domains for the majority of the participants, they determined that poor research designs as well as methodological and procedural problems made the results largely uninterpretable.

In addition to therapeutic riding programs, horses have been utilized as a catalyst for change in quite a different manner. A pioneer in the field of AAT, Dr. Ron Zaidlicz, began a horse training program at the state penitentiary in Canon City, Colorado, in the late 1970s. The penitentiary had bought three wild mustangs from the Bureau of Land Management but was unable to train them. Zaidlicz's program, even though it had not been intended to teach vocational skills, allowed inmates to learn equine husbandry, from gentling wild horses to treating injuries and illnesses, with some men becoming farriers. Inmates also learned how to care and trust. As an added benefit, the Department of Corrections made money to support the prison (Strimple, 2003).

A similar initiative, the Wild Mustang Program, operated at the Southern New Mexico Correctional Facility from 1988 to 1992. It began in response to a need to tame and train wild horses in danger of starvation. After the Bureau of Land Management began to remove wild horses from
overcrowded public land, it created a partnership with the New Mexico Department of Corrections. Inmates would halter break the mustangs and prepare them to be sold to the general public. Granger and Kogan (2000) concluded that "this program was a win-win situation. The horses were handled humanely, the NMBLM was able to improve its public image, and the correctional facility was able to offer work to its inmates that did not threaten any private industry" (p. 224). In 1992, Cushing and Williams (1995) prepared a comprehensive research study of the Wild Mustang Program which included qualitative and quantitative evidence. The results of this study can be summarized as follows: Subjective assessments revealed that inmates assumed a nurturing role by caring for the mustangs. As a staff member commented:

This program gave them the opportunity to know themselves. They didn’t know that they could give affection, and be gentle. They had to be able to give peace to the horse. They had a responsibility to the horse and had to pull these attitudes out of themselves in order to do the job. (p. 101)

In addition, inmates experienced a sense of autonomy by being in charge of their project and accomplishing a common goal. While the corrals were built just outside the
facility, not one inmate tried to escape. Another perceived benefit was that inmates worked through and overcame the danger of being near these wild horses: "The inmates would be 'taking the fear out' of themselves at the same time they were 'taking the fear out' of the mustang" (p. 102). The local administration stated that inmates developed increased self-esteem and self-confidence. This sense of accomplishment was shared by corrections staff who viewed the program as providing meaningful and productive work.

Overall, the qualitative evidence suggested the Wild Mustang Program contributed to better emotional and psychological states of the inmates and staff. Furthermore, the study's data analysis revealed that of the 56 men who had participated in the WMP and been released, only 14 had been reincarcerated in New Mexico for an estimated recidivism rate of 25% percent. This figure was considerably lower than the average recidivism rate for New Mexico (38.12%) although the authors warned that evidence regarding recidivism is inconclusive. Their data did support, on the other hand, that "participation in the WMP is clearly associated with a reduction in the overall number of disciplinary reports and the severity of reports swung away from major to minor" (p. 106).
Interestingly, the study revealed that if WMP participants also received substance abuse counseling, disciplinary reports decreased by 55%. The authors concluded their study by stating that their efforts "reveal strong subjective assessments of positive benefits of the program... it seems advisable to continue the Wild Mustang effort with more attention to the evaluation research needed..." (p. 110).

Several other horse programs at correctional facilities began with a quite different purpose: To rehabilitate retired race horses. When the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation was looking for properties to house their horses, they discovered an opportunity to utilize a 110-acre parcel of abandoned dairy acreage at the Walkill Correctional Facility in New York (Crist, 1989). An agreement with the New York State Department of Correctional Services was reached, and they began a program in which low-risk prisoners would learn how to take care of retired racehorses. From its beginning in 1984, it has been evident that this program is rehabilitating humans as well as horses. It is considered an "extraordinary vocational-training program... that is providing renewed hope and a second chance for... inmates and ... retired race horses" (Crist, p. 7). Many of the
race horses had been discarded or neglected, heading for the meat auction after they no longer had economic value at the end of their racing careers. After they arrive at the facility, inmates care for the horses and nurse them back to physical and emotional health; this healing process affects not only the horses, but the inmates as well.

In what can be considered a mutually benefiting relationship, horses and inmates help each other. Jim Tremper, head of the vocational training program, said he had seen the horses change the prisoners' lives as much as they changed the horses'. "Especially the more violent guys....a lot of them have intimidated people with their size in their lives, and they seem to respect the power and strength of the animal. It humbles many of them" (Wise, 2003, p. 1). At the same time, the program offers much more than rehabilitative therapy. While half of the students' time is spent working with horses, the other half takes place in the classroom where inmates complete a one-year course based on a State accredited curriculum developed by the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation (Crist, p. 7). The program also attempts to place graduates in race-track or farm jobs after they are released. The Department of Correctional Services has been
working with officials to license these men on a case-by-case basis. Crist concluded that "the Walkill program will provide a supply of unusually skilled and motivated candidates for those [race-track or farm] jobs, if the state will license them and the trainers will give them a chance" (p. 7).

Another program of this kind operates at the Charles Hickey School in Baltimore, Maryland, a juvenile detention center. Andre Wheeler, who manages the farm on behalf of the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation, expresses how the emotional connections juveniles make by caring for the horses help to turn their lives around. "What they [the horses] are giving back to these kids is an unconditional love that they don’t have" (Pedulla, 2001, p. C3). The program’s effect on the lives of incarcerated juveniles, while difficult to measure and largely based on personal experience, is profound. "I needed a change in my life, and without something dramatic happening, I don’t think I would have changed" (p. C3). These words came from a 17-year old who looked forward to graduating and continuing his education in college; he said the horse program and farm experience at Hickey "helped him cope with the feeling of losing his freedom for the first time" (p. C3). Betty Jo Bock, a vocational trainer in the
Florida Department of Corrections cited in this article, attributes the dramatic results of the combination of inmates and horses to the following: "Many inmates lack social upbringing and rely on power and control. To work with a horse, you have to have effective communication" (p. C3). Pedulla concluded that "in working to create that safe and comfortable environment for the horses, many inmates must depart from the conduct that cost them their freedom" (p. C3).

The relationship between participation in a therapeutic riding program and improvement in self-concept was the purpose of a study by Cawley, Cawley, and Retter (1994). Twenty-nine adolescents, ages 11-17 and identified by the school system as having special educational needs, participated two days a week in an eight week therapeutic riding program. They found a small increase in self-concept with a lessening in behavioral problems. Younger students seemed to have the greatest degree of improvement, suggesting that "the program would perhaps be more beneficial if it was offered at the earliest possible time after students have been identified as being at risk" (Cawley, Cawley & Retter, 1994, p. 133).

Positive results of therapeutic horseback riding for individuals with psychiatric disabilities were reported by
Bizub, Joy, and Davidson (2003). Five adults participated in a ten-week horseback riding program where they learned basic riding skills and also had opportunities to bond with a horse. Additionally, they participated in a process group that promoted individual expression. All riders reported success in learning horsemanship and, more importantly, psychosocial benefits, including increased self-efficacy and self-esteem: “The success of riding grew into a sense of accomplishment that one could then use as an anchor for future efforts and activities. Moreover, successfully overcoming fear opened up the future as a horizon of hope” (Bizub, Joy & Davidson, 2003, p. 381). The researchers also observed that relationships developed between the riders and their horses, with participants describing the time spent with the horses as unconditional love. The horse became “a therapeutic tool that aided in diminishing one’s own sense of being isolated or different” (p. 382). Overall, the results of this study suggest that “getting in touch with a horse, both literally and figuratively, can enhance one’s appreciation for both the horse and one’s self” (p. 383). Follow-up discussions after six months confirmed the positive results.
A qualitative study of a program that uses equine-facilitated psychotherapy with vaulting as the group therapy activity of choice revealed several themes (Vidrine, Owen-Smith & Faulkner, 2002). For example, participating children expressed their experience of the horse as providing a source of approval, acceptance and affection; feeling of comfort in the presence of strength; and a qualitative difference in human-animal interaction compared to interactions with other humans. These observations support the hypothesis that the horse could perhaps play a better role of initial mediator for children who have been harmed by adults. The authors concluded that

therapeutic vaulting offers a unique opportunity for experiential group psychotherapy experience. Participants are able to address developmental, personal, and social needs in the context of a somatically engaging, challenging, and enjoyable activity. (p. 602)

Overall, it appears that reported results are hopeful and provide sufficient reason to pursue and further investigate the benefits of equine-assisted activities and therapeutic riding programs. Those who are involved, providers as well as participants, are certain that horses
can have considerable impact on the mental and physical well-being of humans, particularly those with whom more traditional approaches are ineffective. As with any developing field, there is a lack of literature on research and scientifically acceptable studies which presents a major obstacle to its general acceptance. In order to be able to evaluate this field more objectively, there is a definite need for further research to support what many in their heart know works.
CHAPTER THREE
METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to develop a model that outlines the processes and incorporates best practices of an equine-facilitated program for at-risk youth. Guiding questions for developing this model include: How can participating in a horse program affect and help change the attitudes, skills and behaviors of at-risk youth? What learning experiences (i.e. experiences that change the way one feels, thinks or behaves) can occur? What strategies are effective with at-risk population? In what type of setting, using which approaches?

The research design most appropriate for this study is a qualitative approach that explores the experiences of youth participating in horse programs. It is descriptive and hypothesis-generating since I hope to discover what is unique to equine-human interaction based on experts' perceptions and interpretations. Since there is little prior research in this field, this exploratory study is intended to lead to further investigation; its purpose is to "elaborate a concept, develop a model with its related subcomponents", and to "suggest propositions" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001, p. 399).
In the remainder of this chapter, I will describe the three phases of the methodology. Phase I, data collection, consists of multiple methods of data collection using three sources of data. First, existing literature is examined regarding current practices, observations and reported effects on participants in a horse program. The second source of data is an examination of various horse programs currently operating. The variety of programs are briefly described in order to determine what spectrum of programs the field recommends. The third source of data consists of expert interviews which are a valuable account of first-hand experiences. These in-depth interviews include specific as well as open-ended questions to reveal the learning experiences taking place in a variety of equine-facilitated programs.

During Phase II of this study, data treatment, the collected data will be analyzed and compared. It will be examined for recurring observations and themes which are then clustered and categorized. Phase III, the final phase of this project, consists of the development of a model that outlines the processes and best practices of an equine-facilitated program for at-risk youth. This model will be based on the overall findings of this study and is
intended to be a guideline for individuals planning to implement a horse program for at-risk students.

Phase I: Data Collection

The first phase of this study, data collection, uses the process of triangulation with three sources of data: 

1. Literature Review

As with any emerging field, very little research has been conducted to evaluate the outcome of equine-facilitated programs. The lack of journal articles on the subject led to a broader search which revealed largely anecdotal observations and findings, published predominantly in professional newsletters, magazines or on the internet. Although these articles don’t provide research-based evidence of the effectiveness of the programs, they do, however, inform us of current practices and reported observations and benefits. In the process of examining the literature, special consideration was given to the particular needs of at-risk youth. What evidence exists that interacting with horses brings about learning experiences beneficial to their success in school as well as life? Even more importantly, which activities allow these learning processes to take place? Another topic that will be explored in the literature is the human-animal
bond, particularly as it relates to working with horses. What can horses teach that we can’t, and what makes them such effective “messengers”?

2. Description of Various Programs and Observations

In order to provide a sense of the field, a brief introduction to the variety of equine-facilitated programs that are offered is necessary. This section looks at different approaches with varying degrees of intensity ranging from weekend horse camps to residential programs and equine-facilitated psychotherapy. This step is not intended to be a comprehensive overview of equine-facilitated programs since this would exceed the scope of this study. A few programs were particularly selected because they were geographically accessible, represent varying degrees of intensity, and serve a population compatible to that in question. The fundamental selection criteria were:

- Does the program intend to teach life skills?
- Is the program sensitive to the needs of at-risk youth?
- Is the program’s primary focus on improving the youths’ lives (i.e. is it not primarily a riding program)?
- Are activities conducted in a safe and supportive manner?
- Can this program contribute to the development of a model outlining best practices?

The selected programs will be described in detail, based on personal visits and observations, brochures and other available material. Special attention will be given to personal observations and anecdotal notes derived from observing the adolescents interacting with the horses and each other.

3. Expert Interviews

In a further attempt to gather qualitative data, semi-structured interviews with experts in the field will be conducted. The participants are all individuals who conduct the horse programs and have first-hand experience of their effects. They include a licensed therapist considered a pioneer in the field, a teacher, horse professionals and private individuals. These individuals were selected because their programs vary in nature yet serve similar populations. It was the intent of this researcher to discover if and how their experiences were similar and what common themes might emerge from their observations.
The in-depth interviews included general, specific and open-ended questions, selected from a bank of questions and matched with the individual programs, followed by more probing questions arising from answers provided. The interviews will be tape-recorded, transcribed and included in the appendix. The questions and prompts range from general to specific and include the following:

- Please describe the nature of your program.
- What are some of the activities youth engage in?
- What would a typical session be like?
- What are your overall objectives?
- What makes this program unique?
- What learning experiences do you see occurring during the sessions?
- In what areas do you see most growth and improvement?
- How can this be measured?
- Why use horses in the work of human development?
- How can participating in this program improve behavioral and academic performance?
- Do you use reflection and processing as a component of the sessions?
- What are some of the challenges in this program?
- What would you like to tell others about this type of work?

The full list of questions is included in Appendix A.

Phase II: Data Treatment

During the second phase of this study, the data collected from the different sources will be analyzed and compared. It will be examined for emerging themes and recurring observations. These themes will then be clustered into categories and subcategories as applicable. This particular data treatment procedure allows that the results in the findings section are presented by themes and not by the respondent or source. These themes can then be readily incorporated into the model for best practices in an equine-facilitated program.

Phase III: Model

The third phase of the study develops a model that outlines the process and best practices of an equine-facilitated program for at-risk youth based on the overall findings. This model will provide guidelines for effective strategies and approaches as well as desired learning outcomes and benefits. It includes a short curriculum consisting of:
- Program Rationale
- Pre- and Post-Test for participants
- Learning goals and objectives
- Sample activities
- Sample forms
- Processing components/journaling prompts
- Staff evaluation instruments
- Final student evaluation instrument

While this particular model was designed for a visiting horse program at a rural boot camp facility for boys from 15 to 18 years old, it can be easily modified to serve other at-risk teens. The intended learning processes and strategies are meant to be a guide to others who plan to implement a horse program.
CHAPTER FOUR
FINDINGS AND RESULTS

The purpose of this project was to develop a model that outlines the processes and incorporates best practices of an equine-facilitated program for at-risk youth. The findings and results of this project are grouped into three consecutive phases which include data collection, data treatment and the development of a model outlining the processes and best practices of a horse program.

Phase I: Data Collection

The first phase, data collection, used the process of triangulation to include three different sources of data. The sources of data consisted of:

1. Literature Review

Due to very little scientific research available specific to horse programs for at-risk youth, the literature review included related fields (such as literature on outdoor experiential education and human-animal interaction). In addition, the reported findings of some articles included in this review often rely on practice, anecdotal evidence and observation instead of research-based evidence regarding the
effectiveness of such programs. This anecdotal evidence was intentionally included to depict current practices and reported benefits in order to reveal emerging patterns and themes.

Research indicates that outdoor experiential programs can be an effective strategy to address the needs of at-risk youth (Berman & Berman-Davis, 1995; Bruyere, 2002; Moote & Wodardski, 1997). Moote and Wodardski (1997) concluded in their review that the overall goal of adventure-based programs appeared to be enhancing self-esteem and self-control. In accordance with these findings, several studies indicated changes in self-perception. For example, Cross (2002) reported that participants showed significantly lower perceptions of alienation while demonstrating greater perceptions of self-control. These changes were attributed to belonging to an important task, the ability to make choices with immediate consequences, and being accountable for them. Likewise, Garst, Scheider, and Baker (2001) indicated that self-perception was affected by participating in an outdoor adventure program, together with social acceptance and behavioral conduct. They attributed these changes largely to the novelty of such a program and taking participants out of their high-risk environment.
On a larger scale, Moote and Wodardski (1997) found sufficient evidence to suggest improvement of life skills for adolescents. Butler (1993, as cited in Moote & Wodardski, 1997) similarly considered many components of outdoor experiential programs beneficial to adolescents' development. These components include: Fun and excitement, group and individual skill development, trust, communication, taking risks as well as physical, mental and emotional challenges. Berman and Davis-Berman (1995) also found that the element of risk and facing fears or issues contribute to the success of outdoor programs. Additionally, they stressed that staff and participants relate to each other in physical activities and do not rely solely on talk which can often be ineffective with resistant at-risk adolescents. Like others, they also pointed out the importance of an unfamiliar setting which can reduce defensiveness and facilitate interaction with staff.

The literature on human-animal interaction indicates that animals can play an important role in assisting different populations to grow on psychological, behavioral, and social levels. Some early researchers agreed that animals as change agents are especially beneficial to disadvantaged groups of society such as the
incarcerated, the mentally challenged and others facing adversity (Beck & Katcher, 1983; Cusack, 1988). They pointed out that animals have the capacity to bring out human qualities such as affection and compassion while reassuring the person of their self-worth. These findings are shared by others, particularly in a study at a juvenile correctional facility where incarcerated youth trained unwanted dogs for adoption. The results included considerable behavior improvement such as respect for authority and social interaction; in addition, growth was reported in such areas as honesty, empathy, nurturing, confidence and pride of accomplishment (Merriam-Arduini, 2000, as cited in Strimple, 2003). Similar positive results were reported by Kogan, Granger, Fitchett, Helmer, and Young (1999) in a study of the effects of animal-assisted therapy for children with emotional disorders. They experienced positive growth in areas of appropriate behaviors, developing a sense of pride and accomplishment, and enhancing self-esteem. In addition, the study’s findings support the hypothesis that the growth may generalize to other settings. While participating in equine-facilitated programs falls within the category of human-animal interaction, horses are unique because of their size and that they can
be ridden. A review of the literature specific to horse programs revealed several recurring factors and benefits that come into play when working with horses, despite the tremendous variety of programs and populations. It appears that psychosocial benefits are reported by all programs reviewed and present a common thread of observations.

In particular, several researchers have cited an increase of self-esteem and self-efficacy by participants in various horse programs (Bizub, Joy & Davidson, 2003; Cawley, Cawley & Retter, 1994; Cushing & Williams, 1995). Learning how to effectively handle and ride horses is a considerable task for which many participants have to overcome their fears and issues. Especially Bizub, Joy, and Davidson (2003) concluded that the success of learning to ride and overcoming fear can provide a basis for other endeavors in which individuals with disabilities are more likely to take on new challenges. Similarly, inmates participating in the Wild Mustang Program also developed increased self-esteem and self-confidence as reported by the local administration (Cushing & Williams, 1995). Interestingly, the sense of accomplishment was also shared by the correctional staff who supported a program that provided meaningful work and attested to its benefits.
In many cases, horses provide a therapeutic and healing effect on participants in what can be considered rehabilitative therapy (Crist, 1989; Cushing & Williams, 1995; Vidrine, Owen-Smith & Faulkner, 2002; Wise, 2003). Especially in the case of incarcerated individuals, participants showed a softer side and took on a nurturing role by caring for the horses. As reported in Cushing and Williams’ (1995) study, inmates got to know themselves in the program and discovered they could be gentle and give affection in order to properly take care of the horse. Wise (2003) agrees with these findings and adds that especially the more violent inmates who have worked with intimidation most of their lives are humbled by and respect the retired racehorses in their care. He even goes on in stating that horses and inmates engage in a mutually benefiting relationship where they heal each other. Interestingly, Bizub, Joy, and Davidson (2003) reported similar results in their study of a therapeutic riding program for individuals with psychiatric disabilities where the horse became a therapeutic tool. The researchers observed that relationships developed between riders and horses, and that participants described the time spent as unconditional love. They concluded that the horses
facilitated in decreasing the individuals' feeling of being different or isolated.

The therapeutic value of horses is even more pronounced in programs that conduct equine-facilitated psychotherapy. In a qualitative study by Vidrine, Owen-Smith and Faulkner (2002), the participating children considered their experience with the horse as providing approval, affection and comfort. The researchers concluded that the horse could perhaps play a better role of initial mediator for children harmed by adults than other humans. Similarly, the program manager of another program at a juvenile detention center stressed the emotional connections juveniles make with the horses that give them an unconditional love they otherwise don't have (Pedulla, 2001). Participants stated that the horse experience helped them cope with their feelings and that it brought about change in their lives.

All of these results combined support the hypothesis that a horse program can be an effective intervention strategy for at-risk and adjudicated youth. There is, however, a definite need for scientific studies and research in order to evaluate this growing field more objectively. In addition, the discussed findings did not attribute the results to specific activities and
strategies. They also did not include specific details of practice, making it difficult to determine which activities allow the learning processes to take place. While there seems to be widespread agreement that this approach works, there is a definite need for detailed studies which delineate the learning processes taking place in equine-facilitated programs.

2. Description of Various Programs and Observations

The second source of data consisted of an examination of the variety of horse programs being offered. In order to obtain a sense of the field, it was necessary to look at what type of programs exist and how they operate. This section looks at a few equine-facilitated programs with varying degrees of intensity and gives insight into the spectrum and different approaches of such programs. It is not intended to be a comprehensive overview since this would exceed the scope of this study. The programs are described based on personal visits and observations, brochures and facilitator descriptions. They were selected according to the following criteria:
- Does the program intend to teach life skills?
- Is the program's primary focus on improving the youth's life (i.e. not primarily a riding program)?
- Is the program sensitive to the needs of at-risk youth?
- Is the program accessible?
- Can this program contribute to the development of a model outlining best practices?

Type 1: Weekend Horse Camp. Inner City Slickers is a program developed to enhance the lives of children, ages ten to seventeen, with the use of horses. It is conducted at a ranch in Agua Dulce, California, by a private individual, Michael McMeel. Since 1994, he has provided at-risk and inner city kids an opportunity to visit the ranch and participate in overnight camps. Since this program was geographically accessible, I participated in several sessions as a volunteer to immerse myself into the program. The kids and teens, ranging from boyscouts/girlscouts to probationers, participate in many activities modeled after outdoor adventure programs in which they learn trust and respect - for the horses, themselves and each other. A group of 20-25 kids and teens is randomly divided into smaller groups, or "posses," and
over the course of two days learn to care for a horse, ride, rope, ride a mechanical bull, and work as a team during several trust exercises. Evening activities include powerful sharing and processing around the campfire. It was particularly noteworthy how open and readily everyone shared after spending such a short time together. Watching the teens interact with the horses was amazing: While some instantly developed a connection, others (usually the bigger and tougher kids) were skeptical and approached cautiously. However, everyone readily participated in all activities and it was apparent they not only had a great deal of fun during this new experience but also pushed themselves to the limits learning new and challenging skills. Although difficult to measure, one cannot help feeling these kids leave this program as a slightly different person. While they had a chance to participate in exciting and fun activities, they learned what it means to push themselves, work with others as a team and experience success - something they often lack in other areas of their lives. An in-depth interview conducted with the program’s facilitator will reveal detailed results and insights in the next section of this study.

Type 2: High School Program/Horsemanship Class. Some high schools offer horsemanship as an elective class on
campus, usually as part of Future Farmers of America (FFA) or 4-H programs. While the overall goal of this type of program is to teach horsemanship, riding and animal evaluation skills, students also learn valuable life skills as described in the next section based on the expert interview. Even though these classes are not designed to teach specific life skills, many such lessons are learned with the help of horses to increase student insight and achievement. In addition, students are exposed to potential careers in agriculture or the horse industry.

Type 3: Animal Therapy/Therapeutic Riding Program. Mustard Seed Ranch’s mission is to provide specialized animal-assisted programs to children and young adults mostly from foster homes and placement facilities. They visit the ranch from supporting agencies and engage in specially designed animal activities, ranch chores and discussion groups. The primary goal is to reconnect children in a relationship and to help them connect with each other, with animals and the adults who believe in them. This approach falls within the field of equine-facilitated activities in which the focus lies on learning life skills such as trust, communication, problem solving, anger management, and personal responsibility. Observing the horse’s reaction to their behavior assists
teens in identifying their own issues. These activities take place in a natural environment through focused activities where participants learn by doing. The ranch intends to provide experiences that restore the children’s trust, ability to belong, and the faith that knows the future holds hope and a purpose. This program is faith-based and funded through donations from Mustard Seed Ministries.

**Type 4: Residential Therapeutic Riding Program.**

Canyon Acres is a residential treatment facility for severely emotionally, physically and sexually abused children ages six to thirteen. Children stay at the facility on the average about eighteen months with the goal to be placed in foster care. The therapeutic riding program has operated formally for approximately five years and is part of the recreational therapy day treatment program. The therapeutic riding instructor works on the child’s goals and objectives according to the individual treatment plan together with other team members. This program is highly structured and specifically addresses various behavior issues, lack of concentration and focus, low frustration levels, or the inability to complete tasks. The instructor and an assistant work with two children at a time for an hour in which the first half
consists of a routine, typically completing chores around the horse. The remainder of the time could be a riding activity, bathing or dressing up the horse, or painting. Each session is documented and included in the treatment team's report.

When I had the opportunity to volunteer at this program on several occasions with different children, it was apparent they needed a high level of care and supervision. Several had great difficulties completing fairly simple tasks, staying focused and not giving up when a task was perceived difficult. Some chose not to ride and participated in other ways. However, for the most part the children seemed to enjoy the activities and were eager to do what was asked of them just right. Especially during grooming and riding, they appeared immersed in the activity and were concerned about the well-being of the horse.

Type 5: Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy Program.
Desert Dove Farm, Inc. is a non-profit organization that provides therapy services utilizing horses. All sessions are facilitated by a certified horse professional and a licensed social worker. This intensive program provides outpatient services for kids ages nine to seventeen and is designed to help youth increase their ability to cope with
life difficulties, build resiliency skills, communication skills and higher levels of self-esteem. The therapeutic team works closely with the youth while they interact with the horses and works on such issues as teamwork, frustration, perseverance and respect. The overall goal is to provide an environment that empowers youth and helps them improve their social, emotional and behavioral functioning. This program is not primarily about riding, with 95% of the activities done from the ground with the horses, but instead gives youth the opportunity to experiment with ideas and questions while working through group and individual challenges set up for them. These challenges may include anything from simply haltering and leading a horse to asking a horse to jump over an obstacle without having any physical contact with it. Youth learn to process feelings and behaviors through interactions with a horse that has personality, attitudes and moods as unique as their own.

When I was able to observe a session, it was evident that this is a powerful form of therapy with youth who might not readily disclose issues they face in traditional counseling. As they work through challenging exercises, their feelings surface quickly and are processed with the help of a therapist, either in the moment or at the end of
the session. As indicated, connections are made to other areas of the youth’s life to achieve transference of learning. The participants displayed a range of emotions, from frustration when things became difficult to a sense of pride and accomplishment when a task was completed. Although this is a rather intense program, the participants were very motivated to complete the tasks and enjoyed the activities.

Taking a close look at the variety of equine-facilitated programs and in some cases observing first-hand how they operate and affect the participants proved to be a valuable source of data. While difficult to extract and measure in quantitative terms, it is apparent that “something works” by the degree of motivation, participation and transformation the youth display openly. Although programs vary in intensity and design, they all aim to improve the lives of youth, especially at-risk and disadvantaged youth, with the help of horses. These programs show that this task can be accomplished in many different ways - from very structured activities to setting up tasks and seeing where it takes them. Although the programs are built around horses, most are not so much about learning horsemanship or to ride but to help youth develop their full potential. It appears that horses serve
as the catalyst for change, a common thread in all programs.

3. Expert Interviews

The third source of qualitative data consisted of expert interviews which are a valuable account of first-hand experiences. The eight participants were all individuals who conduct the programs and include a licensed therapist, a high school teacher, certified horse professionals and private individuals. They were selected because their programs vary in nature yet serve similar populations and purposes. It was the intent to discover if and how their experiences were similar and what common observations might emerge from their responses. The in-depth interviews included general, specific and open-ended questions selected from a bank of questions included in Appendix A. An evaluation of the interview transcripts revealed the following:

The overall most general common thread of all programs is that they are intended to improve the lives of youth. They are not so much about horses or riding but rather "an investigation of who you are," as one participant stated. Horses do, however, play a big role in all the examined programs, they help kids "become better people and have a better understanding", as another
interviewee put it. Even the instructor of the horsemanship course strongly emphasized that besides teaching about the horse she “wants the kids to take something away from the program that makes them a better person” and is convinced it saves kids: “For some it’s the only thing that keeps them straight in school and out of gangs.” One participant who conducts equine-facility psychotherapy considers the approach a metaphor for life and explained it this way: “The lessons you learn with the horse are the exact same lessons you need to learn in life. They are the everyday living skills that the occupational therapist and the psychotherapist are trying to help their clients to deal with, only it’s more real.” Another participant, the Director of a Therapeutic Equitation Program, summarized it as follows: “No matter what, people have to understand even though we may not validate how effective this treatment is, those relationships that individuals are able to make with these horses is in some cases what helps develop their life skills, helps improve their outlook on life – it saves lives.”

Another general observation in analyzing the interview data was the degree of certainty each participant expressed regarding the effectiveness of their
programs. It became evident that all are absolutely convinced their program works and emphatically attested to its success. One participant explained that the horses are a vehicle to tap into the kids but at the same time they can translate their learning into other areas of their lives - which he is convinced of or he'd "quit this program today." Another interviewee of the same program stated: "The things we're doing are working awfully good, that's why I stayed with it." One participant even stated she thinks "it's the only thing out there," whereas another more cautiously expressed that "it affects everybody, all the kids to some degree, some more than others." Participants often left their more traditional occupations to venture into this experimental field despite the fact it is "hard work" with funding being an ongoing concern. Their degree of certainty, although subjective, constitutes a powerful testimony for these programs.

The next step in analyzing the interview data consisted in categorizing the participants' responses in order to outline the learning experiences that can occur and determine contributing factors and elements. The findings were as follows:
Importance of Setting. Several interviewees stressed the impact of taking youth out of their familiar environment and putting them in a new, unfamiliar setting outside their comfort zone. Whether activities take place in the wilderness, a ranch or the far end of a high school campus, youth find themselves in a new and often challenging situation and become more accessible. There is an obvious reason why they need to learn, horses are large animals and often perceived as scary. Youth are purposefully put in situations where they aren’t very comfortable. As one interviewee put it, “what we do is basically a way of creating a situation for these children that’s kind of scary, kind of unfamiliar to them, which makes them drop their kind of cool thing, their ‘I don’t want to participate’ kind of thing. The horses and the environment just kind of seem to dissolve that...”

Horses Facilitate Change. All participants agreed that horses play a key role in facilitating change in many aspects. First of all, the teens want to interact with the horses and ride them which motivates them to learn and work on things. The horse gets their attention right away and when participants realize their usual way of acting is ineffective they are open to learn new ways of behavior. In addition, working with horses increases self-awareness
and allows the teens to get to know themselves. Since horses give instant feedback, the results of one’s actions are immediate and the youth see it (such as consequences, validation, or gratification). What makes this even more valuable is that horses are “honest”, they can’t lie and respond with non-verbal communication and visible actions. Even more significantly, horses as highly sensitive prey animals also mirror a person’s emotional state such as anger, fear, timidness, calmness and intent. One interviewee explained that “they often tune us out... when the horse shows them that that’s not a good idea, or that that is a good idea, that’s instant feedback, and our kids can take that in and they can retain it.” Working with horses also teaches to be present in the moment and to focus on the task at hand. Furthermore, youth who often don’t think they can complete anything learn the value of perseverance and realize that if they keep trying, they can figure it out. They experience first-hand that “success comes in small doses” - a valuable lesson for life.

Development of Self-esteem and Confidence. Learning to control a large, powerful animal such as a horse is a considerable undertaking for most. Youth typically have to overcome and work through their fears when learning to
handle and ride a horse. As their skills increase and confidence rises, their self-esteem builds considerably: "...and then when they are successful, their face just lights up because they had a successful experience, and nobody did it for them, and it's such a huge, huge thing.” Another participant explained that most at-risk youth display extremely fragile self-esteem and "when a horse responds positively to a child, that’s a huge self-esteem boost for our kids because they think that nobody wants them, nobody loves them, nobody cares for them, and when these horses show that they care, our kids light up.”

**Therapeutic Value of Horses.** All participants expressed the value of horses to reach people on emotional and intrapersonal levels. While difficult to pinpoint, there is a consensus that "horses become part of the people", that "there is some kind of bond that I don’t know if anybody could ever explain." Another respondent stated that "there is something unique about horses. It could be ... that they reach out to the kids. They want to smell them and know who they are, and I think that’s a wonderful gift with a horse.” One interviewee who conducts therapy stated that "where they won’t let people in, they’ll let this animal in. It becomes very important for them not to upset or anger their equine partner, and so
gradually that’s translated back in their world with their family and friends and school.” Horses can also be a confidant or provide consolation when youth are displaying emotional or behavioral difficulties. By caring for and handling horses, youth also “learn to have empathy through other awareness, what the horse needs, what he is telling you.” In addition, participants expressed that youth often make a connection and form a relationship with the horses. This is especially important with reactive attachment kids that struggle with forming any type of meaningful relationship with adults or peers. Activities such as grooming, feeding and caring for the horses are part of all programs and encourage forming these relationships.

Another valuable consideration is that horses can be a source of unconditional acceptance and affection. As one participant stated, “I know we have some kids that have trouble fitting in, whatever their issues are, the horses don’t care. This is a safe environment.” In return, otherwise reserved and distant youth may spontaneously pet, hug or even kiss a horse and openly display their affection. Furthermore, participants reported that the youth developed trust - in themselves, others and the horses.
Interpersonal Development. The interviewees also stated that youth typically improved interpersonal skills such as working with others, communication, assertiveness, and interaction with peers. One participant commented: “It’s amazing, the bonds they have connected with us, with the horses, to see them grow...by the end of that first session, they were encouraging each other and becoming this cohesive group.” Another participant stated that “their willingness to assist other people, their willingness to get more involved increases.” Communication (verbal and especially non-verbal) and assertiveness are essential to working with horses and it quickly becomes apparent to youth that they must find a way to properly communicate their intentions.

Reflective Component. To varying degrees, all programs have a reflective component where participants reflect on and process their experiences. While they can be traditional, as in the equine-assisted psychotherapy approach, or rather informal around a campfire and in conversations, this strategy encourages the participants to internalize their learning experiences and make connections to other areas of their lives. The interviewees stated that kids open up readily and “give an inside look at themselves.” Furthermore, during
equine-assisted counseling one participant stated that "they project so much from their life, and we learn so much about them so quickly which you don’t get in traditional counseling." The respondents feel that youth do make connections to their own behavior and can transfer their learning experience to other areas.

Overall, the data collected in the expert interviews was strikingly similar and consistent among the various participants and programs. Recurring experiences and common observations emerged which revealed the learning processes that can occur in equine-assisted programs. The findings support the hypothesis that participating in a horse program affects and can help change the attitudes, skills and behaviors of at-risk youth. In addition, the data collected also attempted to uncover underlying factors, reasons and processes responsible for these changes.

Phase II: Data Treatment

In the second phase of this study, the data collected from the three different sources (literature review, program descriptions, and expert interviews) was analyzed and compared. First, the data was examined for emerging categories such as nature and objectives of programs, the
role of horses, setting and activities, and transference of learning. Next, the role of the horse was closely analyzed since horses are what make these programs unique. Special emphasis was placed on identifying recurring themes in order to determine the processes and best practices of an equine-facilitated program. The data analysis revealed the following:

Nature and Objectives of Programs

Horse programs are not about horses or learning horsemanship. Instead, they aim to improve participants' lives by providing learning experiences that can change the attitudes, skills and behaviors of various populations. All interviewed experts shared this philosophy which is perhaps the main lesson learned from all programs. A comparison of the data revealed that psychosocial benefits were reported by all programs and are a common thread of equine-assisted programs. They are experiential by nature and include many elements of outdoor experiential education programs; as such, they can be an effective strategy to address the needs of at risk youth (Berman & Berman-Davis, 1995; Bruyere, 2002; Moote & Wodardski, 1997). While participants engage in activities with horses, they learn about themselves and others. In
the process, they need to apply many life skills which are developed throughout the program.

Role of Horses

The role of the horse, nevertheless, is significant in these programs and makes them unique. Horses are used as a tool or catalyst for emotional and cognitive learning processes where participants are engaged mentally, physically and emotionally. An analysis of the data revealed the following themes:

Horse as Change Agent. Experts and researchers agree that horses are the catalyst for change in these programs. In an article by Pedulla (2001), incarcerated juveniles stated that the horse experience brought about change in their lives and helped them cope. Experts stated that horses usually get the participants’ attention right away. Participants quickly learn that their usual ways of acting and demeanor won’t work and that they must learn new behavior and skills in order to work with this large, powerful animal. In addition, horses increase self-awareness by giving instant feedback to one’s actions. The consequences can be negative (where the horse does not respond or displays unwanted behavior) or positive (thereby validating behavior), but in either case the feedback is immediate and visible. Perhaps even more
significantly, horses as highly intuitive prey animals mirror a person’s emotional state. Experts agree that whether a person is angry and aggressive, timid or fearful, quiet or assertive, the horse responds accordingly and mirrors these emotions back to us. These qualities of the horse are significant because for any change in behavior to occur, one must first become aware of it - and horses do a remarkable job facilitating this awareness.

Horses can also provide a valuable distraction from teens’ personal issues such as worries, stress or pain they might be experiencing. As one expert explained, working with horses can take their mind off other things and teaches them to be present in the moment. Participants can learn how to let go of their preoccupations and focus on the task at hand.

**Horse as Motivator.** Kids and teens are naturally motivated to participate in activities with horses, they especially want to ride. They quickly learn, however, that in order to build up to this activity, many tasks and chores have to be completed first since horses require considerable work. Activities such as cleaning stalls, grooming, feeding and caring for the horses are typically part of the program. While many participants would
normally not readily complete these chores, they realize their importance through natural consequences. In the process, they learn the importance of work ethic, perseverance and responsibility.

Furthermore, horses motivate youth to explore new interests or roles and provide an opportunity to experience healthy, fun recreational activities. They open up a different world to at-risk youth who are often caught up in negative behaviors and activities due to the lack of positive alternatives. Youth experience that there are healthy and rewarding activities available for them. At the same time, they learn to work with and relate to people from a wide range of backgrounds, whether it’s the facilitators or “cowboys” conducting the program or other members of their group. Several experts reported that participants showed considerable improvement in interpersonal skills such as working with others, teamwork, peer interaction, and communication. In addition, youth learned the importance of leadership and assertiveness when working with others, people and animals alike.

Horse as Teacher. As opposed to humans, animals teach non-verbally through their body language and behavior. Their responses are honest, clear and usually unmistakable
- horses don't lie or have a hidden agenda. Experts stated that for at-risk youth who have often been let down by adults in their lives, this form of non-verbal communication can be more effective than teaching or counseling that relies on talk. Horses get their message across differently while still teaching many valuable lessons. As opposed to a human teacher explaining what to do or what not to do, the horse instantly shows by his response whether or not a particular action was right, and the participant usually "gets it" right away. At the same time, participants learn the importance of their own non-verbal communication and its effects on others. As participants learn new skills, especially something that was at first perceived as difficult or scary, their confidence grows and their self-esteem increases considerably. They worked through and conquered their fears or issues and accomplished a big task, to control a large animal. These observations are supported by research on outdoor experiential education, especially in the studies by Moote and Wodardski (1997), and Cross (2002) who reported that the overall goal of such programs were enhancement of self-esteem and self-control. Likewise, children with emotional disorders experienced enhanced self-esteem through animal-assisted therapy (Kogan,
These findings are consistent with other research on various horse programs (Bizub, Joy, & Davidson, 2003; Cawley, Cawley, & Retter, 1994; Cushing & Williams, 1995). Interacting with horses and participating in structured activities can also enhance youth's intellectual development. Participants can learn higher-order thinking skills such as observation, inquiry, problem-solving, creative thinking and application of knowledge. These skills can greatly increase their success in other environments, such as school or everyday life. Although at-risk students in the classroom often easily give up when a task is perceived too difficult, in equine-assisted programs they are motivated to work through a task and acquire these higher-order thinking skills in order to achieve a desired, meaningful result. Personal observations during program visits confirmed experts' statements; all participants completed every task asked of them and never quit.

Horse as Therapeutic Tool. Being with horses can provide emotional healing and be highly therapeutic for many populations (Crist, 1989; Cushing & Williams, 1995; Vidrine, Owen-Smith & Faulkner, 2002; Wise, 2003). Several experts agreed that equine-facilitated programs are a way
to reach people. Where human caregivers might be unsuccessful, the horse can be a listener, comforter, or even a friend. Especially in the case of hard to reach youth with trust issues, a horse might serve as initial mediator better than a person (Vidrine, Owen-Smith & Faulkner, 2002). It was reported by a psychotherapist and other program facilitators that the horse "invites" a relationship and reaches out to people. In return, many children and adults make a connection or form a bond with the horse. Research on human-animal interaction (Beck & Katcher, 1983; Cusack, 1988) agrees with these findings and stresses the importance of animals for disadvantaged populations especially. The role of the horse as mediator is particularly helpful for at-risk populations who frequently have difficulties forming and maintaining relationships. The horse can also provide consolation and be a confidant in times of need. Perhaps even more significantly, a horse can be the source of unconditional acceptance (Bizub, Joy & Davidson, 2003). Horses don't care how big or small you are or how much money you have, they only respond to how you treat them. Furthermore, where human teachers and caregivers are limited, it is okay for a horse to express and receive affection openly. Activities such as brushing and grooming allow the
participants to feel, touch and to be gentle with another being which can calm and soften hardened individuals, particularly incarcerated populations (Cushing & Williams, 1995).

**Role of Setting and Activities**

The setting plays an important role in equine-assisted programs since it takes youth outside their comfort zone and puts them in a new, unfamiliar environment. Data obtained from the expert interviews as well as literature supports the importance of an unfamiliar setting and challenging activities. Research on outdoor experiential education programs (Butler, 1993, as cited in Moote & Wodardski, 1997; Berman & Davis-Berman, 1995) also supports this finding; especially Garst, Scheider and Baker (2001) who attribute many changes in perception and behavior to the novelty and environment of these programs. In order to make it in this setting, they need to learn new skills and navigate their way through different and perhaps frightening experiences. Experts explained that youth are often purposefully put in situations that make them feel uncomfortable. The activities are usually challenging and perceived as scary by most participants. With the help of the facilitator and other group members, however, they work through these
challenges and learn to persevere with difficult tasks. This component provides a powerful metaphor for youth’ everyday lives; if they can accomplish these challenges, why can’t they show the same perseverance in other areas? The success of overcoming fear and learning to ride can provide a basis for other endeavors as youth are more likely to take on new challenges (Bizub, Joy & Davidson, 2003).

Transference of Learning

In order to process learning experiences and make the connection to other areas of their lives, programs usually include a reflective component. This gives participants the opportunity to think about their experiences and make connections to their everyday lives. The approaches vary greatly and include informal sharing around a campfire at the end of the day, ad hoc one-on-one conversations with the facilitator, and processing with a licensed therapist. Personal observations illustrated how readily and openly participants disclosed their feelings and thoughts. In response to the question if participants can transfer their learning to other areas of their lives, the interviewed experts were convinced that youth make these connections and take something away from the experience that will help them in many other areas.
Summary

The results obtained by an analysis of the collected data indicate that equine-facilitated programs can be an effective intervention strategy for at-risk youth. This approach incorporates benefits associated with outdoor experiential education programs and animal-assisted therapy programs. In addition, working with horses is unique since horses possess many qualities that make them especially powerful messengers. A comparison of the various sources of data revealed many recurring themes and observations which adds validity to the individual findings. While many reported results are difficult to measure objectively and little formal research has been conducted in this area, there is an abundance of anecdotal evidence and apparent consensus that this approach works. In the course of this study, recurring components of equine-facilitated programs as well as associated effects and benefits were identified which made it possible to determine the processes and best practices of these programs.

Phase III: Development of Model

The third phase of this study consisted of the development of a model that outlines the processes and
incorporates best practices of an equine-facilitated program for at-risk youth. This model is based on the overall findings of this study and is intended to be a guide for individuals, especially educators, who consider implementing a horse program. It features specific strategies and approaches as well as desired learning outcomes and benefits and includes the following:

- Program rationale
- Learning goals and objectives
- Sample activities
- Processing component/journaling prompts
- Pre- and post-test for participants
- Final participant evaluation instrument
- Staff evaluation instruments
- Sample forms

The complete model is included in Appendix C of this study. Its components can be briefly described as follows:

**Rationale, Purpose and Outcome of Program**

No matter where a horse program might be implemented, obtaining funding and required approval is a major consideration in getting a program started. Since these activities can be perceived as costly and dangerous, it is imperative to include a solid proposal for such a program that includes specific reasons for the proposed program as
well as intended outcomes. The model includes a program rationale as well as specific learning goals and objectives, grouped by the different program skills to be taught.

**Methodology**

The methodology section includes all essential details as to how the program will be conducted. It describes participant selection, duration of program, supervision and safety procedures, as well as other details which address potential concerns beforehand.

All activities were carefully planned and structured according to the learning goals and objectives. The suggested activities of this model incorporate various processes and practices that were identified in this study. They are designed to lead to learning outcomes similar to those depicted in this study. While this model includes a vocational component, learning horsemanship, equal emphasis is given to teaching life skills which can enhance at-risk youth' success in the classroom and other areas of their lives. Specifically, the activities were designed to promote growth in such areas as confidence, acceptance, self-efficacy, communication, trust, assertiveness, teamwork and the willingness to try new, healthy activities.
In an effort to measure student learning and evaluate the success of the program, several evaluation components were developed and are included in this model. Students are pre- and post-tested by completing an evaluation record of their horse and life skills at the beginning and the end of the program. In addition, students complete a final evaluation with open-ended questions for which they can share their experiences in detail. Throughout the program, students reflect on their learning by completing a record book and journal in which they address specific writing prompts. In addition, staff also prepares anecdotal records which describe their observations of the students as another method of tracking student progress.

While this particular model was designed for implementing a program at a ranch-type facility for adjudicated boys ages 15-18, it can be modified to serve other at-risk teens. Learning goals and objectives of each program as well as individual activities should be customized for the intended population in order to best serve their needs. This model can serve as a guide, however, to facilitate program design and implementation.
CHAPTER FIVE
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Your horse is your mirror. Learn what your horse has to teach you and then apply it to something else in your life.

Old Arab Proverb

This study was conducted to find an alternative approach to reconnect at-risk youth and to help develop adolescents who can and want to succeed in school and, ultimately, in life. We cannot teach a student to whom instruction is meaningless because they have become alienated from school or mainstream society. Based on personal experiences and largely anecdotal evidence, I became interested in exploring how at-risk youth could benefit from equine-assisted activities as an unconventional intervention strategy to improve their self-perception and life skills development.

Summary and Conclusions

Although there is a consensus among practitioners and experts that these programs “work”, there are no guidelines for implementing equine-facilitated programs. In order to meet this need, the purpose of this study was
to develop a model that outlines the processes and best practices of an equine-facilitated program for at-risk youth. Guiding research questions for developing this model included: How can participating in a horse program affect and help change the attitudes, skills and behaviors of at-risk youth? What learning experiences can occur? What strategies are effective with at-risk populations? In what type of setting, using what approaches?

The research design most appropriate for this study was a qualitative approach that explored the literature and experiences of youth participating in horse programs. The model was developed as follows:

First, I reviewed the literature in several areas related to the research questions of this study. Since there is very little research on equine-facilitated programs, literature from related fields was also included. The first section of the literature review examined research findings of adventure-based outdoor education programs. The second section focused on literature on human-animal interaction and the human-animal bond, while the third section took a closer look at what makes working with horses different from using other animals.
Next, the methodology was implemented in three different phases in order to collect and analyze three sources of data. Phase I, data collection, consisted of collecting data from the literature review, various existing horse programs, and expert interviews. In phase II, data treatment, the collected data was compared and analyzed. It was examined for recurring observations and emerging categories and themes in order to determine the processes and best practices of equine-facilitated activities. Several themes emerged such as the nature and objectives of equine-facilitated programs, the role of horses, setting and activities, and transference of learning. Special emphasis was placed on examining the role of horses since they are what make these programs unique. The findings and results obtained in this study support the hypothesis that equine-facilitated programs can be an effective intervention strategy for at-risk and delinquent youth. This alternative approach incorporates benefits associated with outdoor experiential education and animal-assisted therapy programs. Moreover, using horses as a catalyst for change makes these programs unique since they are especially powerful messengers. The comparison of the various sources of data revealed recurring observations and findings which added validity
to the widespread belief that equine-facilitated programs can improve the lives of at-risk youth in many areas. Although results might be difficult to measure objectively and little formal research has been conducted, the findings and results of this study confirmed that this alternative approach can change the attitudes, skills and behaviors of at-risk youth.

The findings and results were then incorporated into the development of a model that outlines learning experiences and best practices for a horse program during phase III of this study. This model is intended to be a guide for individuals, especially educators, who consider implementing a horse program. It presents specific strategies and approaches as well as desired learning outcomes and benefits. In addition, the model includes a program rationale and methodology with sample activities, processing components, as well as evaluation instruments and sample forms. While this particular model was designed for a specific population, it can be easily modified to serve other at-risk youth in different settings.

Although equine-assisted programs have grown considerably across the country during the past decade, there is a definite need for creating a body of knowledge about practice and outcome of these programs. This
exploratory study attempted to respond to this need by illustrating specific possibilities of this type of work based on theoretical considerations and practical experiences. It intended to provide insight into this growing field and, more importantly, encourage others to consider this approach as an intervention strategy for at-risk youth. The developed model can be a valuable resource in this field and serve as a guide for individuals who contemplate implementing an equine-facilitated program.

Recommendations

Although the lack of a body of knowledge in this field can be considered a drawback, it can also serve as an incentive to create and develop strategies that enhance this type of work (as it was the case in this project). Many practitioners of equine-assisted programs are pioneers in this emerging field who developed their programs as they went along. Although the expert interviews of this study revealed that they are convinced of the effectiveness of this approach, attempts should be made to closely monitor the effects of equine-facilitated programs and measure their outcomes. There is a tremendous need for further studies and research on practice and
outcome of these programs. These studies would greatly benefit current as well as future programs. Therefore, programs should be open to and encourage scientific research projects in order to document results which in return can promote the general acceptance of this work and add validity to it. Additionally, this research should be published to become available to others.

As with other innovative approaches, a lot of work still needs to be done in order to promote general acceptance of equine-facilitated activities. Existing programs should promote this field by inviting the media or conducting open houses, for example. Furthermore, there is an obvious need for a comprehensive bibliography of the professional literature. In addition, the development of training or accreditation programs and professional organizations can further help establish this field as an officially recognized discipline. All of these factors would greatly enhance the ability to obtain funding for these programs (which is an ongoing concern for most).

Concluding Remarks

This study confirmed what started long ago as a personal notion that I was “on to something” by connecting at-risk adolescents and horses. It validated the belief
that equine-facilitated programs can provide an effective alternative intervention program that engages at-risk teens mentally, physically and emotionally in their learning process. This approach might allow us to reach young people who have otherwise closed the door on us. Teaching in correctional and alternative education programs for at-risk and delinquent youth encompasses much more than students learning basic skills or content and accumulating knowledge. Educators have to find a way to reach them first. After we effectively address their needs, we can teach them and facilitate them reaching their full potential – a considerable but rewarding task.

On a personal note, this project started a process with far-reaching consequences. I have become immersed into the field of equine-facilitated activities and am convinced I will continue to pursue this interest in the future. Not only am I a “believer”, but in the course of this study I have also been able to obtain a substantial grant which provided the start-up funds to implement this model and conduct a pilot program at Twin Pines Ranch, a juvenile probation facility near Banning, California. To this day, we have conducted two programs and are hopeful that our equine-facilitated program will be continued in the future. The results and benefits of this program have
exceeded our expectations by far - which could be the subject of a future study.
APPENDIX A

EXPERT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
Expert Interview Questions

Please describe the nature of your program.
How long has this program operated?
What are the ages and backgrounds of the participants?
How would you explain “equine experiential learning”?
What are some of the activities youth engage in?
What are the individual components of your program?
What would a typical session be like?
What are your overall objectives?
What makes this program unique?
What are some of the skills youth learn?
What learning experiences do you see occurring during the sessions?
What are life-related skills youth learn? Do they make connections?
In what areas do you see most growth or improvement?
How can this be measured?
What do participants take away from this experience?
Why use horses in the work of human development?
How can horses help people to reconnect to their self?
What does the interaction with horses provide that other programs don’t?
What are some of the techniques used by educators and counselors?
Do you use reflection and processing as a component of the sessions?
What are some of the challenges in this program?
How are they addressed?
How can participating in this program improve behavioral and academic performance?
What makes a program effective?
What advice would you give others interested in this field?

Is there anything else you would like to add?
EXPERT INTERVIEWS

Interviewee: Faye Gandolfi, Desert Dove Farm Inc.

Date: 5/16/05

Could you describe the nature of your program?

It’s an equine facilitated psychotherapy program, working with kids ages 9-17, groups of 6 at a time, they’re not coed. It focuses on life skills and coping skills, we’re dealing with anger issues, team work, competence, communication, verbal and nonverbal, and 95% of activities are done from the ground with the horses.

What is your background in this type of work?

I am the founder of Desert Dove Farm, it was incorporated in 2000. When I developed it, it was going to be a riding program, but then I found EAGALA. I went to their training and thought it was amazing stuff, it would greatly work with kids. I came back and did a pilot with a group of adults and a therapist I was working with at the time, and it was just wonderful. We did a pilot group with the kids as well, and the results we saw just in the eight sessions of our pilot program were amazing. Their confidence was up, they were working better as a team. These were kids that came from low income, disadvantaged families, with parents in prison, all of the different backgrounds you can imagine. As an equine specialist, I’ve been involved with horses off and on all my life. I’ve had mine for nine and a half years during which I’ve been under professional training, I’ve done all the showing, just really broadened my knowledge. Prior to that, I was a paralegal for the county attorney’s office; actually, that’s how my focus came to be on kids, I was doing the drug court program. Being for the prosecution’s side, we just never had contact with the defendants prior to this program. You got to know these defendants and hear all their stories and the bad things that happened to them. It was kind of like, these were not necessarily bad people, they just needed help a long time ago. So I really wanted to put emphasis on the prevention for kids, so I kind of just meshed all of this together. We’re just finishing our third year of working with kids.

Where do your kids come from, and how are they referred?

Our kids come from schools, from other after school programs, other agencies. We have a steady stream of referrals from the Care Family Center which is under Arizona’s Children’s Association. They are focusing on providing services to kids who are not raised by their biological parents, for example they are adopted, raised by foster parents or grandparents. We are getting to a point now where we’re putting it out there for the community as a whole, so any individual family can call up and say they want to get their kid into this program. We’re trying to grow.
What are some of the reasons why kids are referred to your program?

Social-emotional issues, anger problems, gang activity...the experiential component to this [program] is just amazing, and what is really cool is that these kids project like you wouldn’t believe onto the horses. We have one horse in particular, when we turn him out he parks himself in a corner, he hangs out by himself, that’s just the way he is. But the kids say, when we ask, “what do you think about Marc over there?”, they’ll say “oh, he’s orphaned”, or “his parents died.” It gives me goose bumps, and this is in the second session that we do this activity. They project so much from their life, and we learn so much about them so quickly which you don’t get in traditional counseling.

What are some of the typical activities participants engage in, and is there a common element?

We do things like catch and halter, we do basic grooming. We do join ups, we sometimes have the entire group move the horse around the arena without having any physical contact with the horse. We focus a lot on pressure, the amount of pressure needed. We spend a lot of time talking about passive, assertive, and aggressive behavior, and where on that pendulum they are. We have kids come through that are angry, and they go immediately from being passive to aggressive, there’s nothing in the middle. We’ll have them lead a horse over a tarp, and the horses we use will not just walk over a tarp unless they’re asked nicely, properly. We have kids that go to a tug of war with the horses, we just stand there and let them figure it out, that they have to change their demeanor, that they have to soften. And we have kids that go from tug of war to bending down and touching the tarp to show that it’s okay for the horse, or they go up and pet the horse. It’s all experiential; here this aggressiveness didn’t work, and they modified it on their own. We’re not standing there saying “you’re aggressive, you can’t do this, it doesn’t work, you can’t talk to people like this, and you can’t treat the horse this way”...they’re figuring it out on their own, and it’s an amazing process, and it’s their’s. In all the exercises, it’s always their success, we do not rescue. That’s huge, perseverance with these kids. They come and don’t think they can complete anything. We give them a task, simply to catch a horse and halter it: “There’s your horse, here’s your halter, now go get him.” They might say, “I don’t think I can do that.” We reply, “sure, just see what you can do, see what you can come up with.” We coax them, and then when they are successful, their face just lights up because they had a successful experience, and nobody did it for them, and it’s such a huge, huge thing. The other thing they experience is trust, trust in others but especially in themselves, being able to accomplish and trusting themselves that they can do it.

Each kid is different, we do something depending on what the group is like. We don’t have a set curriculum where each session is planned out. We know what our first two sessions are: Session one is an introduction to the horses because usually the kids are anxious, it’s a new environment, they may or may not work with kids they already know. We walk to the barn and get one of the horses out, we go over safety, and we do
a trust hug. You put your arms around the horse’s neck and hang from the neck, so the horse supports them. That’s their first challenge, and it’s amazing how tough that is for a lot of these kids, most of them have never been around horses. They have to trust the horse, themselves, etc. Our second session is the catch and halter, and really, during those two sessions the kids project a lot, it gives us an opportunity to just observe and really get to know them and what their needs are. Then we develop from week to week what we want to do based on what we previously observed. It seems like with all of these kids, our themes are generally the same. There’s always the perseverance, there’s always the trusting, there’s always going to be the common ones that we go through, but it may be that one exercise is better for one group than another. A lot depends on age, we could have a group of nine-year olds where certain exercises don’t work that are appropriate for the older kids. The groups are specialized.

Why horses – what makes them different and powerful in the interaction with kids and teens?

They’re big, they’re intimidating, it brings up a lot of fear, being able to work through fears because these kids may be afraid of getting on horses from the very beginning. We teach an emergency dismount which me metaphorically apply, everything we do we metaphorically apply to what’s going on in their lives. Then there are some activities where they get on, we get some kids up there who are just rigid. We start talking to them about anything but what they’re doing, and then they relax. We ask, “what changed?” and they realize that when they think about something else they’re okay...

Do you think horses “mirror” the kids’ behaviors?

Yes, mirroring is the big thing. Especially when you take the passive aggressive pendulum, the horses really reflect what’s going on in those kids. The horses give the kids immediate feedback, and they see it. We don’t tell kids this is why we use horses.

Every horse we use, just like people, is very different. A lot of times, we start with an activity where a kid works with a horse, and at some point we have them switch and we talk about did it work with this horse versus the other horse? Did you have to change your behavior? They’re working with different personalities, just like they would at school, they learn how everybody is different. The nonverbal is the other really big thing, what they’re giving off with their ears, their tail, etc.

Do you notice that the kids form bonds with the horses?

Oh yes, some more than others, but they really do. For it not being a riding program, these kids don’t want to leave. They want this to go on and on, and they’re not even learning horsemanship.
Are there connections made between what happens in the program and real life situations? If so, are they made during the session or afterwards during reflection?

We do both. We’ve had sessions where it’s right there, we process it and talk about it because it’s necessary, it’s not something we can let go until the end of the session. We always finish the session with, “what were you successful with today, what made you feel good?” Regardless of what went on in the session, no matter how good or bad it was, they’re leaving with something in their mind they were successful at. We do communication exercises, it’s actually what you’re going to see tonight. We call it a blind trust walk, we set up an obstacle course with poles, buckets, etc., and one kid is the leader, they’re leading the horse, and one kid is on. The leader is blindfolded, and the kid that’s on has to give verbal instructions to get the kid and the horse through this obstacle course. We focus on trust, communication, what instructions were good. They learn what they’re saying, whether or not people are interpreting it the way they mean for it to be interpreted. Again, the trust in other individuals...the frustration of somebody who can’t see having to go strictly by direction from somebody else who may or may not give good directions – what do they do with that frustration, and how can you handle that so you don’t explode or get angry? How often do any of us do that, when we explain something we think somebody should automatically know what we want because we know.

What are some of the difficulties you encounter?

Funding, I’ve done it as a nonprofit, so basically I’m out there begging for money to keep it going. My therapist subcontracts for me, but I am keeping the program going as the horse specialist. I’m getting grants, etc. to pay for the therapist, myself and the horses. We don’t have overhead, we pay a daily use fee for the horses we use.

In what areas do you see the most significant improvements in the kids when they complete the program?

I don’t know if I can answer that, the spectrum is so huge. We’ve got kids that come with predominant anger issues that are not so aggressive when they’re done. We’ve got kids that didn’t care about school, that didn’t care about homework and would always argue with their parents and are now willingly doing their homework without being told. We get feedback from the parents that kids improve in school. What it is, it’s perseverance, that’s a huge one. They figured out, well, if I keep trying, I can get it done. Some of our exercises go on two or three sessions so that they learn success comes in small doses, that it’s not go out there and get everything done the first time you try. We apply that all the time, we talk about math, “how often do you get a problem that you get so frustrated with because you don’t understand it and give up? Is it okay to work on it, leave it all alone, come back to it and try it again, or ask for help?” A lot of these kids don’t ask for help, or if they do, they ask, “will you do it for me?” That’s probably a major impact area, confidence, I think. Also, they’re more
respectful of themselves and others. Their self-esteem is up, but again, everything comes back from the success, from being able to accomplish things. It’s so interwoven...if you can get to those core developmental assets and strengthen them, you hope that the rest is going to follow. We do an activity called temptation alley, it’s an EAGALA exercise. They basically have to get a horse through an alley way without him eating, and those are his temptations. We process it: “How did you help the horse to avoid his temptations? What are your temptations in life?” We get everything from “Oh, I’d rather sit down and play video games than do homework” to stealing, and we talk about that, like “who can you go to to help you avoid those temptations, or is it coming from peer pressure?” We had discussions about drugs, because a lot of the kids are seeing them in elementary school, especially junior high.

Do you feel it is imperative to have a licensed therapist present?

Absolutely. I had one woman come out, she just wanted her son to ride and have a horse experience. It wasn’t meant to be therapy. She came out a couple of times, and the second time I had the boy on the horse and I had him do “around the world”, a balance exercise where you sit on the horse, then sit sideways, then backwards, you’re basically making a circle on the horse’s back. He didn’t want to do it, and what came out of it was that he didn’t trust his mom, she was standing on one side and I was standing on the other. This was a mother and son who had been living with domestic violence, and I thought, oh my gosh! This is when you need a therapist out here. This was coming from just mounted riding, he wasn’t out for therapy.

Is there a way to measure this, and do you evaluate the kids before and after?

I do, it’s done with a questionnaire through Brigham Young University. When we first started, we used the Children’s Depression Inventory, and we found it just wasn’t effective, the questions weren’t really appropriate to what we were doing. We were trying to deal with kids that were under 12 and having them do it, often kids that age won’t give you that information. We’re better off letting them come out and let them project in the first couple of sessions and pick up what we can in the sessions. Then we switched to a questionnaire developed by EAGALA that they had found to be useful as a tool. It’s being used by quite a few programs as I understand. It has proven a good way to monitor. Granted, any of these evaluations are subjective which makes it hard, but we do it as a pre-test and then we give it to the parents and pray we get it back as a post-test. Right now, we’re having a 78% improvement rate, which I think it’s pretty darn good. It measures interpersonal relationship skills, it measures six different categories. I don’t worry so much about the pretest, the kids are the way they are, but we see changes and huge growth. When we’re talking to the parents and caregivers, they report a lot of change, and we have a written evaluation where they may say, “they’re getting along better with their siblings or are doing better in school”, and then they come back with a post-evaluation, and there’s no improvement. Did they do it on a day where the kid acted up, and that’s what is foremost in their mind? That’s what’s
hard, because when they do have a bad day that’s what’s foremost in their mind versus what they’ve seen over the past four months. It is subjective, and I’ve been really happy with being able to use it. I can look at a pretest and a post-test and look at where they were before and what the parents filled in at the post-test and usually we can see that, yeah, that kid really improved in that area because we would have seen it in groups. So I believe in the tool.

What are some of the challenges in this field, and what are some of the things that don’t work?

I guess it depends on what you’re doing in your program. In our case, our difficulties can be transportation even though our attendance rate is really high. Sometimes schools transport or caregivers. Other than that, funding. I’m happy with my grant proposal, but sometimes it’s so hard to put it in writing what we do, it’s a big frustration being able to get it across on paper. You can explain it, you can explain it on paper, but unless they can actually see a visual or come out and have us be able to walk through an exercise it’s a hard thing to get across.

Do you think this approach works across the board? Did you ever have kids it did not work for?

I guess there’s different degrees. You have some kids that blossom, you have some kids where there’s improvement but it’s on a much narrower margin. We have a group of boys right now that, and I know they’re not technically classified as seriously mentally ill, but they’re in a special program at the school because they’re behavior is such, and actually we did an eight week program, they just finished a four week follow up, and we’re going to continue in the fall with the same boys, and we don’t normally do that. They normally come for their original program, follow up, and then they’re done. They’re seeing so much improvement with these kids, but it is so....it takes so much longer. Of these four boys, we’re lucky if we have 50% participation, that’s just where they are emotionally. Something you don’t even see sets them off, and they’re gone. You’ve got those kinds where it takes longer, but it affects everybody, all the kids to some degree, some more than others. But we don’t claim to be a “fix-it” program. We’re not going to fix your kids, what we’re going to do is give them the means to learn those skills so that they can do that.

Do you think helping kids to reconnect with themselves is the foundation of the progress they make?

You should probably ask the therapist that question, I don’t know if I can answer that. My instinct would be absolutely.

Any general advice you could give others going into this field?
I guess from my perspective, I did it from a nonprofit standpoint, I wouldn’t change it. It’s been tough, there’s definitely been times when I said I can’t do this anymore, but stick with it. Even as a for-profit...it’s amazing what happens in these sessions, and it makes all the hard work so worth it, to be able to get these kids there, and to have an impact in their lives. I mean if you would have told me ten years ago I would be working with kids I would have said you’re crazy. But it’s amazing, the bonds they have connected with us, with the horses, to see them grow. We had groups come where they didn’t know each other at all, and at the beginning of the first session they were hardly talking to each other. Already, by the end of that first session, they were encouraging each other and becoming this cohesive group.

Do you track the kids long-term?

I have tried, but I’m having a hard time getting the post-evaluations back. I have sent out letters, but I’m not getting them back. That’s where the kids are coming from, often the parents are uninvolved or don’t care. We had one boy that, at the end, we give the kids a questionnaire that is basically, “What did you enjoy the most, the least, what did the horses teach you about yourself and life?” What he enjoyed the most was getting out of his neighborhood. That has such an impact because we just opened up his world, that there is stuff out there beyond your couple of blocks.

It also depends a lot on your approach. There are a lot of different ways of doing this. You don’t have to own property, and you don’t have to own horses. I’ve had my horse at this facility and I had support from the facility owner. The horses we use are all individually owned, the owners said we can use them for our program, some are retired or need exercise. Where there’s a will, there is a way to do this work.

Another thing we do which has been very successful is in one session, we require the parents or caregivers to come and participate in the group. So they’re experiencing what they’re kids are doing, we get to see family dynamics, and they get to process with us.
Interviewee: Michael McMeel, Inner City Slickers

Date: 10/15/05

Could you describe your program?

Inner City Slickers is a program developed to enhance the lives of young children, ages 10 to 17, with the use of horses. What we do is basically a way of creating a situation for these children that's kind of scary, kind of unfamiliar to them, which makes them drop their kind of "cool thing", their "I don't want to participate" kind of thing. The horses and the environment just kind of seem to dissolve that, and they seem more accessible. We work at building their character, integrity, team work, responsibility, and we're building courageous kids. What we do is we create situations that bring up their fear, and then as a support group we help them move through the fear and get to the other side. Then they realize that there was really nothing to be afraid of. If you really take a look at what fear is – fear is false evidence appearing real. So if you are afraid of something – and I'm not talking about stupidity, for example if I ask you to jump off this building and you were afraid, I'd be afraid too because you're going to die when you hit the thing – but if I ask you to call this guy that you are attracted to and you are afraid, you would have all these little conversations in your head that say, "oh, I'm not this, how could I call him, he's not going to like me", and whatever, and that prevents you from calling him, right? So fear stops people, and usually it's false, it's usually not real but something in their heads. We take this situation to get their fear churned up and then as they move through the fear and come out at the other side they realize that is was smoke, it didn't mean anything. They've learned not to listen to those voices, that it closes down their possibility for attaining their goal. That's really what it is.

How long has your program operated?

We've operated in this form since 1994. I was shooting a commercial about ten minutes from here in Acton, and it had horses and kids in it. I thought that I must have had City Slickers on my mind because when I went back to edit the commercial, I thought of the plan for "Inner City Slickers". I started calling all my friends and asked them what they thought of the idea, and they thought it was a great idea. That's how this program started.

What made you start a program such as this? Was it your desire to help kids or your belief in the connection between horses and kids?

Honestly, I didn't even know about the connection between horses and kids. In 1992, I started my charity called the Awareness Foundation. That was right after the riots, and I wanted to be of service to the people that were having trouble down there, and of course kids are everything. They are going to be running this country, and we need to get them ready for it. The "horse thing" just came out of this commercial, and after I
did our first Slickers I realized how important the relationships between the horse and people were. I never really knew that until then. So I discovered it myself.

What are some of the activities that the youth engage in when they come out?

First of all, just coming out to a place that has wilderness and no concrete is an amazing reality adjustment for them right there. To come out and it’s dusty, windy, there’s no regular bathroom, just an outhouse, there’s no shower...if they want a drink of water, they drink it out of a hose, if they want to wash, they wash their hands out of a hose. So right there, it’s like whoa, what am I doing here? Then they realize that they are going to sleep in these bunks, where there are mice, there could be snakes, whatever – so it’s just really unfamiliar to them. Then they have to clean the bunkhouses out, they have to sweep them out and make them livable for them, and they have fun doing it. Just the orientation, just to tell them about snakes and bees, it’s just that whole environment that’s unfamiliar to them. We don’t allow them to bring CD players, no telephones, they have to wear their pants up, their hats straight, they have to be respectful to us and the animals. So all this is training for these kids, and it’s amazing how parallel training a horse is to training an individual, it’s exactly the same way. You can have a horse that runs through its stall gate and you don’t show them that that’s not right, you just taught that horse that it can do that, that it can run through the stall gate. Then there’s chores around the ranch, they do everything that I do. They muck the stalls, they water the horses, they move the hey, they clean up in general – they don’t want to do that, they don’t want to get dirty. So step by step they keep getting hit with these things that they are unfamiliar with and that they’re afraid of. Then we do trust games, we have the table fall, we have the ladder fall where they have to be trustworthy, that people that are behind them will catch them. They climb a 30 foot windmill, that takes courage. We put them in posses, so each of them is in a posse, with a leader who’s in charge of that posse. If that posse messes up, I take it out on the leader, I don’t take it out on that posse. We also have the wall of hey, which is a 20 foot wall of hey, straight up, that each posse has to work out how they’re going to get everybody up there. Usually, the first time they do that it takes about five or six minutes. The second time they do it, it takes 30 seconds, so they worked it out.

What are the backgrounds of the kids? Would you consider them “at-risk” teens?

They are at-risk, many of them are involved with gangs. Most of them are from one parent families, or they don’t live with their parent, they live with an aunt or uncle, but they’re all generally low-income, at-risk kids that live in gang areas.

Do you have overall objectives concerning what you want the kids to learn and experience, or do you set up activities and then see what comes out of it?

That’s a good question. I don’t really ever have anything preconceived on what I want to accomplish necessarily with the kids. I mean, there is a general thing, but I want to have them willing to participate and work with each other, that’s always a goal that I
have. I talk to them about what does a hero and a coward have in common, and that is fear. How does the hero handle fear? Well, he pushes through the fear to get to what he wants to do. What does the coward do? The coward runs away. It’s all designed to challenge them and bring them out of their passive, their “cool” thing, so that at the end of the weekend, I want them more alive, more excited about life, to see more possibilities for their future, better communication, a better team member, and a better asset to society. But it never goes the same way, no matter how many times I’ve done Slickers, and I’ve done hundreds of them. It never goes the same way, so you have to be on the ball to let the thing go the way it’s going to go. My job is like I’m the river bank, and they’re the river, and I have to let them flow, but I can change the course of the river, and they’re still flowing.

What would you say makes this program unique and sets it aside from other programs?

This will be an interesting answer. What’s unique about it is me, my point of view about life. See, you don’t have the same point of view as I do, no one does. So the way I look at life and my knowledge of the human mind and how it works and how people behave and why they behave that way, I feel that gives me an insight into what I need to do in order to bring about a particular result. I mean, there are people with all kinds of different work with horses and kids, I don’t know how many work with inner city kids. I know there is a lot of therapeutic riding, but with at-risk kids, I don’t know of too many. I know there’s got to be some out there, I didn’t invent it. I have a policy called “firm, friendly, and fair”, and with these kids, you really have to be firm, friendly and fair. If you beat a horse, that horse is going to act out, if you’re rough with the horse, if you’re impatient with the horse, the horse can feel it. If you’re all those things with the kids, they feel the same thing, and they will rebel against it. You’ve got to invite them in and establish their trust with you. Once that trust is built, then you can expect them or demand in a firm, friendly and fair way for them to do things. That’s what I think is unique about it.

In what areas do you see most growth and improvement during the weekend?

Their willingness to participate, their willingness to talk. I don’t know how much you’re around kids, but their main thing is not to communicate much. I don’t see kids excited about life, personally. The kids that we bring up, they’re not excitable at all. I don’t think they have anything to look forward to. Also, their degree of courage. We have the mechanical bull, which you’ve seen, where some of our kids just get hysterical. They get on this thing, and then we do it very gently, and then we build them up and finally they’re going ten feet in the air and they’re screaming for joy as opposed to panic, and they want to keep riding. Also, their willingness to assist other people, their willingness to get more involved increases. The kids leave and they want to come back. It’s really their passion for life I see increase.
Besides participating in a fun-filled weekend, do you feel then that the kids will take something away that they can translate into other areas of their life on an everyday basis?

If they don’t, I’d quit this program today.

Are you convinced of that?

Oh, I see it all the time. It’s not about horses. If motorcycles did the same thing, or if skin-diving did the same thing, I’d be living on the beach doing skin-diving. The horse is a vehicle to tap into the kids.

Why use horses in the work of human development? Do you see the horse mirror the person’s attitude?

They do all the time. Personally, I’d like to use elephants, they’re just gigantic and scary. No, I’m just funny with you there. Horses have a certain magic attached to them, just how they act, what they do, and how they’ve served man throughout history. Man has just screwed them over, man has been so abusive to horses it’s not to be believed. Somehow this enormous animal can cause a connection. As we’ve talked about before, if you’re angry, the horse can get that you’re angry, and if you’re afraid, it can become afraid. The horse is looking for something to hold on to, to guide it through life, and that means that you have to drop your bullshit so that the horse drops its. Because like you said, it mirrors what’s happening, it mirrors the emotional situation.

Do you see that if the kids realize how they normally act or behave might not work around the horses that they change their behavior and mannerism?

The either change or they might get hurt, not severely but they might get stepped on or the horse might push them over here or whatever. They realize that they can’t manhandle a horse. They might be able to manhandle their parents or charm the pants off of their parents, but you can’t do that with a horse. That horse is there, and if you’re not honest or firm with that horse, you don’t have a chance. They always have to reevaluate. First of all, they’re afraid to even get close. Then, if the horse sneezes or whinnies, they get petrified. Because that horse is unfamiliar to them, they think it’s going to kick them or bite them or whatever, they have no experience around them. But if you put them down on Western Avenue and they see people doing drive-bys, they have experience with that, they are not as afraid of that as they are with this horse.

Would you say in general that this type of program potentially can affect the attitudes, behaviors and skills of at-risk youth?

Yes, I mean if you take somebody and put them in a new environment, they either develop the skills to survive or they don’t, so right there they have to develop some skills, whether it’s communication, verbally or like on a horse, communicating with
the reins, body language, what have you. They have to intensify and solidify those things. A lot of times they’re having the kids close their eyes when they’re on horses, instead of seeing with their eyes they “see” with their other senses, the way that the horse moves and feels, the sounds that they hear.

Do you see the kids sort of “wake up” mentally and cognitively?

Oh yes, they have realizations about life. I don’t know if they’d know that that’s what’s really going on. I find often people walk around in a bit of a trance. They’re so preoccupied with their own bullshit, with their own problems, things in their mind. A lot of them don’t get to see out. If one can be in the present, one can have total happiness. When you take the past and put it in your present, your past becomes your future. My objective here is to get the kids’ attention off themselves and onto the horse, onto you, onto me, off themselves. When they have their attention off themselves, they’re more present, their reaction time is quicker, everything improves. But people are so introverted, saying I’m not this, I’m not that, I’m not attractive enough, I’m not tall enough, etc. To get people’s attention off themselves and out onto the real world is the trick, and horses do that. Danger does that. If I was a teacher, I’d make it so “dangerous” in that classroom in a very safe way that the kids would have to be there. I’d be a lion in there.

What were your experiences during the juvenile hall visits?

It was sad. You see a group of kids that seem as normal as anybody else, and I always remember that when the kids come out and they see these horses, it’s like Christmas morning for these kids, it’s sad.

Were they interested in participating?

Oh yes, totally. They are no different from the kids that come up to the ranch, they basically made a mistake. I think the majority of those kids don’t want to harm people.

Do you think the incarcerated teens would benefit from participating in horse programs?

Totally, we’ve seen it time and time again. The first juvenile hall I went to is the largest juvenile hall in the United States, it houses 900 kids, from eight years old to 21. Everything is about intention, what’s my intention? Is my intention to harm you, or is my intention to help you? That’s it, bottom line, there is no gray, either I’m here to harm you or to help you. When you talk about that circus that goes on in everybody’s head, those voices that you can’t just quiet sometimes, you lay in bed, you can’t go to sleep. You need to quiet that down so that those voices don’t dictate your actions. These young kids don’t get the nurturing, it’s not coming from the family unfortunately.
What are some of the challenges in this kind of work?

Finding money – if the money doesn’t come, I pay for it.

Do the kids process their experiences during the Slicker weekends?

We do a Saturday night campfire where we talk about their experiences. At the end of the Slickers, we sit around and talk about what they’ve learned and what they liked, we used to give out trophies and things of that nature, acknowledging them for what they’ve done and what we’ve seen, and have them comment on what they’ve seen and the changes in them, and what they’ve seen in their friends and the changes in them. It’s funny, a lot of times when the kids first get there I ask, “Who doesn’t really want to be here?”, and a lot of them don’t. But you don’t see that at the end, they’re all very glad that they came. They want to come back.

What do you think overall makes a program effective, and are there some things to be avoided?

What’s great about it, it can never be unsuccessful. I don’t care if it has a life of its own, it’s the sum of all parts being far greater than any individual part. I make sure that things run from this to that, and then be willing to not have them run that way because it needs to go this way. You’ve really got to be perceptive where it’s going.

Do the kids make the connection that if they can control a 1,000 pound animal, perhaps they can be more in control of their own selves?

That’s exactly what we say, that if they can handle that type of situation, why can’t they handle their own bodies? It’s funny, though, on their own, kids often don’t make that connection. Each of them will realize something different. Your thing might be that you’re afraid to speak up or to assert yourself, while mine might be that I don’t want to participate. Or it might be to just feel that you can do it, so everybody will hopefully walk away with some breakthrough in their own character, that’s something they can apply to their own development as a human being. What we do is actually a rigorous investigation of who you are as a human being. It’s not something that you can walk through, it’s like a tidal wave, because once you’re on it you don’t get to go off. They know it when they’re first there, I tell them that you can’t say no. You might say “I’m afraid”, that’s fine, but that doesn’t mean you’re not going to do it. Somehow, together, you’re going to do it. I’ve had gang kids in juvenile hall cry when they got on a horse because they were afraid. I want them to be afraid so that they will open up. We provide the support structure so they see they can count on people.

What would you like to tell others about this type of work?

The adults get healed also. Here’s the thing: We all come with our baggage, just because I’m in charge of this thing doesn’t mean I don’t have baggage and I don’t have
any problems. The kids come with their baggage, the horses come with their baggage, so it’s like us helping the kids helping the horses, horses helping us, helping the kids, helping the horses – so everybody gets value out of it, everybody’s lives change. Some of our people drive eight hours and bring their own horses. Those are people where this program changes their lives. If you want your life changed, be of service to somebody, your life will be changed.

In summary, are you convinced this works?

I would say from my experience dealing with children over twelve years that when you care about another person and you extend yourself to another person and allow that person to be who they are and you’re there step by step moving them in a particular direction, there is no way that individual will not gain a valuable lesson and be able to take that and make their life better. It’s the same thing with a horse, you train a horse in a horse’s time, not your time. It might take you longer than Bill, but I can’t make you wrong for that, you have your own path. Here’s the advice I’d give. Be aware of what’s in front of you and don’t carbon copy the way I’ve handled you or approach this person because it’s completely different. I have to look at who you are, and I have to design and cater to those needs for you, and then I have to look at her and she has completely different needs. I can’t just slap they way I’m dealing with you onto her, it doesn’t work that way.

If the kids have such great results in just a weekend, would you support a program that would expose them to that for several weeks or even months?

Yes, because I’m doing that right now. One of my dreams is to have a facility that operates year round, where the kids come up for three months at a time, and they do everything from they grow their own food, they do everything to be self-sufficient. They have professionals come up, whether it would be veterinarians, bull riders, doctors, whatever, that share their successes and pitfalls they’ve had being a professional, and just giving this kid a chance to be separated from their world, the world they’re used to, and this other world. That’s one of the greatest things you could do if you want to help mold character, you have to take them out of what they’re used to, where they feel safe at. This is my life’s work, I’ll be doing this until they take me away.
Interviewees: Leslie Moreau, LMSW-ACP, LMFT, RSOTP

Leslie has been counseling teens and young adults for over 25 years, specializing in conduct, anxiety and personality disorders. She has been practicing Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy since 1988, combining cognitive-behavioral, stress management and psychodynamic treatments with equine interventions including horsemanship, lunging, riding and round pen interventions.

Mandy Hogan, NARHA Master Level Instructor

Mandy Hogan is the Executive Director and Program Director at Windrush Farm Therapeutic Equitation Inc. With a background in Early Childhood Education and a serious interest in horses, Mandy became involved in the therapeutic riding program at Windrush in 1975. She has been certified in therapeutic riding since 1979 and is a NARHA certified Master level instructor.

Date: May 14, 2005

What is your professional background?

Moreau: I was a juvenile delinquent and started riding horses because I wasn’t allowed to do anything else, and that evolution took me to becoming a psychotherapist, counselor, mentor, eventually licensed and credentialed. I saw an advertisement looking for volunteers at a therapeutic riding center, almost 18 years ago. I started volunteering working with the handicapped kids, and instantly saw the ramifications for the group home kids I was working with, level 4 and 5 living in the group home/halfway house. I started bringing them out there and spent about 4 years trying to put theory into practice. I started to go to clinics and taking lessons, putting together what I knew as a therapist with the horsemanship experience. That’s the foundation for what’s happening now as far as teaching lessons on this stuff. The program I currently operate is in my backyard, dealing with their issues and agendas since 1995.

What is the average age of clients and background?

Moreau: Average age is 15, background is some kind of trauma, abuse or very dysfunctional family, either multiple hospitalizations or incarcerations or failed attempts at other therapy.

Hogan: I am the program director at Windrush Farm. I got into it by having a BS in Early Childhood Education with interest in Special Education. I worked with one of the pioneers of riding for the disabled and came to see what they did. I became certified in 1978 as a Therapeutic Riding Instructor, then a master level instructor with NARHA. I have a real cross-section of students: Regular riders, those with physical disabilities, kids with learning and behavioral issues, and kids with mental health issues. The program needed me to expand my education to include the emotional and mental aspects. I got into it because of my interest in horses and kids, and this was a great unconventional classroom where I could combine the two. The great thing is
some of our kids start at age two. I work more with teens, the independent riders with physical and learning disabilities. Our age range is 2 to 93 at the moment. It’s been fun for me to see how much it’s grown, how it’s become more sophisticated. There’s a real desire to do better things for our clients, that’s where the evolution of separate parts has come about.

What are some of the typical activities you have clients engage in?

Moreau: Everything starts with grooming, building the relationship. The expectation is that they are going to develop at the very least a working relationship with whatever horse they’re paired with, if not a true bond, and of course you can’t force bonds, but you can invite the relationship. The bonds usually develop rather quickly, they’re taught to groom and lead, the basics. They’re taught about predator/prey behavior. They learn how to calm themselves to keep the horse calm. They learn to have empathy through other awareness, what does the horse need, what is he telling you. We talk about “speaking horse” in terms of understanding body language. We work immensely on congruency, what they think, what they feel, what they do, through round pen exercises and free lunging. We teach them how to lunge, all start off on a bareback pad on a lunge line, sometimes for months, to learn how to find their seat, find their center, to partner with the horse. Many of the youngsters I work with a narcissistic, self-centered and have cocooned themselves in anger and misery. They’re very unaware of what they do to other people, and so understanding how they affect others through their work with their equine partner is profound because where they won’t let people in, they’ll let this animal in. It becomes very important for them not to upset or anger their equine partner, and so gradually that’s translated back in their world with their family and friends and school. Eventually, depending on their skill and motivation, they learn how to ride, and we do a lot of yoga on the lunge line. Graduating from the lunge line to riding in the round pen, they learn about taking responsibility by practicing having their aids correct. They learn about taking responsibility for communicating to the horse by using their seat bones, legs, and voice correctly which once again is translated back into their lives. It’s a matter of what the client’s needs are.

How do you begin their treatment?

Moreau: I start with their needs and goals, design a treatment plan based on what they tell me, and their parents, schools.

How does a therapeutic riding program work?

Hogan: We do therapeutic riding. As we have gotten more involved with at-risk kids and there are more students coming from group homes with mental health issues as well as learning disabilities, there is a real need for us instructors to understand what these kids are going through. We need to know the symptoms of diagnoses. I have social workers and psychologists available as consultants to what the psychosocial
goals might be. I have physically disabled children, learning disabled kids where I might work on sequencing skills and behavioral issues and eye-hand coordination. We have the at-risk students where we’re working with behavioral issues, depression and anxiety, as well as the kids with mental health issues. The key is I work with them, doing grooming, some vaulting, and we do riding, but I can’t deal with them in a sophisticated way such as a psychotherapist. I give them lessons and I deal directly with some of their symptoms and behavioral issues, but that’s it. I want to facilitate them understanding the horse, teach them about behavior, teach them about keeping themselves safe around the horse. I let the horse establish parameters for kids with learning disabilities and behavioral issues because I don’t have to be the one telling them “no” which they hear all the time anyway. The neat thing is letting the horse facilitate a lot of the session, but my primary goal is to have them learn how to ride, and teach them the importance of how their behavior reflects on the horse, or if they have difficulty sitting still how the horse acts. The horse is very much a partner in the whole relationship. Some of the kids don’t have good relationships to other kids or adults, and they seem to relate so much better to horses. What better way to make them stronger than to make them a partner with the horse? We are building relationships, letting the horses dictate their needs to the students, so the horses are amazing creatures in what they teach. I’m only the facilitator, the horses are the teachers.

Why horses – what makes them so powerful in the interaction?

Moreau: It’s a metaphor, a metaphor for life. The lessons you learn with the horse are the exact same lessons you need to learn in life. They are the everyday living skills that the occupational therapist and the psychotherapist are trying to help their clients to deal with, only it’s more real. The thing about the horse is there’s instant feedback, whether it’s consequences, validation, or gratification, it’s instant. The horse does not lie, horses don’t know how to lie, the agenda is self-preservation, so they’re going to take care of themselves and respond honestly to what’s going on. With so many kids I work with, they never had an honest response in their life, wouldn’t know one if they saw it, therefore don’t know how to be honest. They’re suddenly faced with the fact that that here they are being responsible for creating this reaction, and what are they going to do with it?

Do the participants make the connection during the session or afterwards during processing and reflection?

Moreau: All of the above, it depends on the client, on the moment, the emotional response....I might say: “Hm, who does that remind you of?”, and we take it from there. We also might process it afterwards. It’s all about the metaphor, and five-year olds get it. It’s very concrete, in your face.

In what areas do you see the greatest gains and improvements?
Hogan: Lessened anxiety. The young people get so invested in maintaining a more moderate level of behavior, feelings, affect, what have you, with their horse because they want to ride, bond, etc. that it will translate quicker into everyday life, and they will start seeing a reduced anxiety level.

Are there any other areas where you see significant improvement over time?

Moreau: Well, everything over time, self-awareness, honesty, which is connected to everything else. If you’re aware of yourself, how you feel, what’s going on, what your issues are, the rest falls into place. Of course this is at levels of degrees.

Is there any way to measure this, and what evidence is there?

Moreau: Good question.....we’re working on that. It’s all anecdotal at this point. How do you measure self-awareness? It’s interesting to watch that so many students develop respect for the horse, they develop respect for those who manage the horse, it demands a certain amount of respect. The kids develop relationships for others and often have never been in a situation where they have respect or a trusting relationship. Horses keep you honest; they will call kids on a behavior before we have to which is wonderful because they don’t believe people anymore. People lied to them for so long that they don’t mean anything where the horse is just right on target, we don’t have to say anything.

What are some of the challenges in this line of work, and how can they be addressed?

Moreau: Physical, emotional, social – the list goes on. It’s high energy work. You’re on your feet, you’re challenged, you have to be able to think on your feet. Financially it’s a challenge with significant sacrifices. What brought me into this occupation was that I realized: 1. Office therapy didn’t really work. 2. It made me crazy, sitting around all day at a desk....you work hard, in all kinds of weather.

Hogan: One of the biggest needs in this field is developing research and developing ways of measuring what it’s doing for the individual. That’s certainly something where a therapist would have a better chance of proving to the world that this is a viable form of therapy as opposed to a riding instructor. We need more people doing equine facilitated psychotherapy because you have clearly measurable goals; you have treatment plans and from that you can measure progress.

Moreau: You put it the right way, some of the juvenile sex offenders and murderers I have brought out have been able to reach conclusions and draw insight and awareness based on just a couple of contacts that would take work in traditional therapy months, and this is profound.

Hogan: The woman I worked for in our program that started in 1964 with learning disabled kids and those with behavioral issues, those kids still come back to Windrush
and say, “do you have a clue what you did for me when you put me in that barn, had me muck those stalls, groom the horses, or help mending fences? I am now running a successful oil business.” This was a kid with severe learning disabilities, terrible behavioral issues, and people had given him up, saying he’s not worth it, and she said “bring them to me.” It’s those things, some kids still come back, there has to be some significance when people make the effort to come back to tell you they’ve turned their lives around.

Do you think helping the clients re-connect with themselves makes a difference?

Hogan: It makes a huge difference to a lot of the people. A few years ago we started working with some at-risk teens, they work with a volunteer, they groom and tack up the horses for a class. They get a lesson on how to work with the physically disabled children. When they did get to help with a kid, they were shocked that we would trust them with that responsibility.

What advice or general remarks do you have for others in this field?

Moreau: Learn your lessons, be a student continuously, never stop learning. Continue to grow. Realize that there’s a kid out there whose life depends on you. My job for many of those kids is to keep them alive until they grow up, they tell me that.

Hogan: No matter what, people have to understand even though we may not validate how effective this treatment is, those relationships that individuals are able to make with these horses is in some cases what helps develop their life skills, helps improve their outlook on life – it saves lives. I see it as improving students lives by helping to teach them how to learn, that being open minded again isn’t so bad, by teaching them respect, teaching them that no matter how many times they’ve been hurt there’s got to be somebody out there that does trust them and respect them, that they might be okay. I have 30 years in therapeutic horseback riding, I wouldn’t give it up for anything, and it doesn’t matter what kind of students. I rely on the educators and therapists to tell me what is okay for me to deal with and what isn’t. Therapeutic riding and EFMHA are great things because there are ways of making this more effective by collaborating with mental health professionals and educators. There is a real need for that, and connecting with animals and nature is definitely healing.
Interviewee: Jacqui Moreland, Therapeutic Horse Riding Instructor

Canyon Acres Children’s Services

Date: 8/3/05

Could you describe the nature of your program?

Canyon Acres is a residential treatment facility for severely emotionally, physically and sexually abused children. Their ages range from 6 to 13, we have both boys and girls. The average stay for our kids is about 18 months but we do have children up to 5 years. The goal for the majority of our children is foster care because most of the parental rights have been terminated, or in some of the cases, a lower level of care. This is a level 14 facility.

How long has the horse program operated?

There have always been horses on Canyon Acres, and Canyon Acres has been here for the last 25 years. It was up until 4 1/2 years ago more of a recreational type activity, there wasn’t specifically program staff or a program that could be identified, it was more that the direct care staff would bring the kids down and they’d eat and hang out. Almost five years ago, there was funding from a foundation, and they started with a year of support. So about four years ago, when I came along, we started to develop the program as it is today.

What are some of the typical activities that kids engage in?

The horse program is part of our day treatment program, the program run by our recreational therapist. We work as a team and work on the child’s individual treatment plan. The activities and the stuff that goes on in the barn would address various behavior issues, and would also address things like lack of concentration and focus, low frustration levels, inability to complete tasks. A lot of our kids have ADHD diagnoses, so we would work on lengthening their focus and concentration time. Again, each child has an individual plan and we work within the plan.

What would a typical session be like?

Each kid spends an hour in the barn, and we have two children at a time because of the amount of supervision they require. It’s structured in such a way that the first half of the session is a routine, following directions, task completion, we call it chores, and taking care of their horse. It always involves stall cleaning, grooming and taking care of some of the equipment. The second half of their session or the remainder of their time is devoted to the activity close with the horse which could be a riding activity, bathing activity, dress-up, or sometimes we paint. So the first half is structured tasks, the second half is less structured and the child almost has to earn the time with the horse. They need to get through the first part, and then they go on to the second part.
The kids are motivated to spend time with the horses because that’s ultimately what they want to do rather than the chores and the tasks.

What learning experiences do you see occurring during those sessions?

I think the biggest one for our kids is that cooperation works. Also, a lot of the feedback that the kids get from the horses is instant, so you can see that when myself and my assistant are telling the kids, “that’s probably not a good idea”, we can tell them five or six times because they often tune us out. When the horse shows them that that’s not a good idea, or that that is a good idea, that’s instant feedback, and our kids can take that in and they can retain it. Another thing that the kids show us is how fragile their self-esteem is. The smallest thing that the horse does in response to the child....when a horse responds positively to a child, that’s a huge self-esteem boost for our kids because they think that nobody wants them, nobody loves them, nobody cares for them, and when these horses show that they care, our kids light up.

Do you have specific areas where you see most growth or improvement besides what you just mentioned?

I would have to say with our reactive attachment kids, the kids that struggle with forming any type of meaningful relationship with adults or peers or people in general, because every person in their life that they have become attached to has left them, so they don’t want to form those attachments because they think well, if I make that effort, that person is just going to go away, but they can make attachments to the horses, and we can see huge differences in our kids. I think that out of all our kids’ diagnoses, that has been the one with the most significant progress. The ability to develop empathy, the ability to attach to the horse, to want to be with them, to start trusting the horse, to start looking for that feedback and understanding the feedback from the horse, for that to be meaningful to the child.

Is there a way to measure this, or how do you get the feedback as far as any improvement or change in behavior?

The feedback that we receive....the client feedback would be the biggest one I think, the child self-reports how good they feel, how they can identify that perhaps when they came to the barn they weren’t in a good place but when they leave the barn they’re feeling much better. We also get reports from the clinicians. During the sessions the clinician has with the child, this program will be brought up and discussed, and then we get feedback from the clinician. A lot of this feedback is positive, and again, it’s a self-esteem thing and most of the positive feedback we get is because the children are feeling good about themselves while they’re here.

Do you have overall objectives regarding what you want to work on beforehand, or do they come up during the sessions?
All of our children have a treatment plan with goals and objectives that is put together by the clinician, and everybody that works with the kid in our entire organization works within that treatment plan. Sometimes the goals and objectives that have been identified with the child we don’t actually see here. We have a child whose goals and objectives are to deal with anger and aggression. Well, we might not see those behaviors down here with the child, so then we would develop some other goals with the clinician within the treatment plan that we would focus on. We document each session, and our notes are written to the children’s goals. Then when the clinician writes his weekly report, which is the report that goes to the county or the social worker or the court, then his involvement in the program will be included in his notes. When we’re working with the kids, these are the areas that we want to work toward, a stronger sense of self, self-esteem, verbalize self-acceptance, be agent positive. These would be all of the things we would encourage a child to do, and then when the child meets one of these goals, such as positive peer interaction, my assistant and I would make a big deal of that. We are guided by the clinician and again, we have a day treatment team, and this is part of a wider treatment team.

Why use horses in the work of human development? What makes this work unique?

Oh, where do you start…for our kids, horses meet them exactly where they are. It doesn’t matter what happened this morning, or last week, or last month. Being absolutely in the moment, and our kids respond very well to the feedback, positively and negatively, that they get from their horses. It works…these are big powerful animals, our small kids can look at them and say, wow, I have some control over this, I have this big strong animal that wants to spend time with me, and I can control myself enough so that I can be with this horse and this horse wants to be with me. It’s those sorts of skills, and the skills we teach them. You know, you teach a kid a skill and they do start to feel better about themselves. It’s an accomplishment, and we have a lot of fun. Kids learn when they’re having fun. That’s why it works.

Do you think they can make a connection between the activities they engage in and life in general? Are there moments when they might think how the experiences in the barn relate to other parts of their life?

Yes, sometimes we have to point that out to the child. When two horses are squabbling over the fence, we say, “that’s just like you and Justin, you don’t get along sometimes”, and the kids can make those kind of connections. Sometimes they make connections we never would have come up with. One time, the child was having issues with the goat, the goat wasn’t behaving, and I eventually said, “John, it’s a goat, he has some issues”, and the child says, “well, it’s a good thing he lives in a group home because we can help him with that.” Things they come up with where we never could make the connection, but it’s also obvious in the references the children make for the horses; the horses don’t get turned out, they get “free play”; after dinner, it’s “quiet time.” Kids very much understand the reward system, the treats. When the horse was
good, the horse gets rewarded. They can come up with some of those things. Now, our higher functioning children can absolutely make connections, but a lot of our kids can make very simple observations. The other side of that is that they can be motivated to work on some issues and things that they are dealing with outside of the barn to get to be here. This is not a privilege for the children, it’s therapy, so it’s never taken away from them as a punishment or anything like that, unless the child is being very unsafe, but if you have a kid that’s just being extremely defiant and no interventions are working and they’re just being defiant for the sake of being defiant, then my assistant or myself would work with the staff and say, “well, I’d love to have you come, you have ten minutes to get those amends or apologies done, and I come back in ten minutes to see how you’re doing.” A lot of the kids can be motivated by their time down here and possibly losing that time. Also, we do have issues with kids being down here at the barn when they’re not allowed to be, but we don’t ever drop them from the program. What we do is they loose their horse time, so next time they come to the barn they get an hour of chores as consequences. Some of the times, even though I don’t know the kids have been down here, they come and fess up. They are not allowed to be down at the barn unsupervised, but sometimes when they’re escalated or they’re having issues they’ll run down here just to be with the horses.

Do you see that the kids then use the horses as a confidant or for consolation?

They do, the staff will sometimes call up and say, “so-and-so is having a lousy day, could you let him come down for ten minutes to be with Jasper?” And those ten minutes with the horse can turn that kid right around. We can motivate the kids to try harder, to do better, to work for something that they want.

What are some of the challenges in this type of work?

Dealing with the level fourteen kids on a daily basis because of the issues our kids have, the amount of supervision they require, the potential for things going downhill rapidly, it’s a vigilance that’s fairly constant. Being able to motivate the kids on a daily basis, some of our kids are challenging, sometimes it can be a struggle just coming up with new activities, new ideas and things they can try, not getting stuck in what you know is successful because that can be easy too – you need to push the kid out of that comfort zone and try something else....it’s challenging. It’s twenty-four seven because it’s horses.

Do you use reflection and processing during or after the session, and if so, formally or informally?

It depends on what the issue was. I’m a therapeutic riding instructor and not a therapist, so there is a line. If it’s something fairly simple, a day to day issue, we would probably process and work through it in the moment. A bigger issue or something that would be a clinical issue would be addressed immediately by a clinician and myself
and the child. There is a definite line between what I would do with a child and what is considered a clinical issue.

Do you think that the children will take away something from this program that enhances and enriches their lives?

Absolutely, across the board, without a doubt. Even kids that I worked with for two years here and then were done, they’re still calling me a year or two years later, “so, how are the horses?” The kids leave here knowing they can do this, that they have some skills, they can ride, and they can take care of horses. The children report when they’re leaving that one of the hardest things for them to do is to leave the horses. They formed an attachment to the animal, deep down there is that connection.

Have you seen things that are not working and others in this work should be aware of?

Yes, the effect on the horses...I’ve had children in the program that have had some serious animal abuse issues in the past, usually with family pets, given the nature of the abuse that our kids have suffered, then animal abuse is not that uncommon. But I have found that even working with kids for more than a couple of years is hard on the horses, and for some of our children with psychosis as part of their diagnosis that putting them with the animals is just inviting more opportunities for animal abuse. That’s definitely something to watch out for and a big red flag.

Is funding an issue for your program?

We were very fortunate to get the grant for the start-up money and the yearly support, we are still operating on that money. Also, when I came along four years ago, I’m very fortunate because I know wealthy people that own horses and I’ve gotten a lot of support just through personal connections. Almost everything here was donated, but I think we do very well. I know programs that struggle with funding, the state recently recognized this program to the extent they increased our entire recreational day treatment budget without specifically saying they were giving us money for this program. They will not support the horses or any cost associated with the horses but they will fund my position and my assistant’s position which is a huge step for us. We also write grants for our programs, for our entire organization I think we get 65% of our money from state/federal funds because most of the children are wards of the state. We have to fundraise for the entire organization for the rest.

Overall then, do you think participating in a horse program can affect the attitudes, behaviors and skills of at-risk youth?

I definitely believe that children can be motivated to work on areas that they’re otherwise not motivated to work on in another setting. I think since this activity is hands-on, outside, physical, it has the ability to connect more with the child again compared to conventional therapists or sitting in a room or classroom-type activities.
For a lot of the different issues that our children have, we have a broad spectrum of diagnoses, everything from Asperger’s to you name it, there’s something that can work for every single child. It’s not like, “throw away your wheelchair and walk”, but it’s a way to reach our children. I think one of the biggest way to reach our kids with having the horses and the goat is for them to develop empathy, they don’t have any given a lot of their first years were just survival and they didn’t develop any of those skills, and they’re not inclined to be empathetic towards people because people have hurt them. When you can develop empathy and feeling and care in any of our children, things after that come easier.

In closing, any advice you would like to give others in this field?

I really struggled in the beginning with lack of information. I came here with twenty years of horse knowledge and no knowledge of these kids. I know it’s better now, with EFMHA and the various other organizations, but for two years it was like, “let’s see if this works.” Honestly, a lot of it was intuition, I mean there is not a whole lot of difference between working with a very unruly half-broke two-year old and our children – the same methods, a lot of repetition and reward, a lot of demonstration, a lot of hands-on stuff. I wish that there were more certifications and programs for just our mental health program because there is endless information out there if you want to work with handicapped kids. If you want to come into this therapy field, be very sure of why you are doing it. I’ve interviewed people who say that they can empathize with the children because they’ve been in that situation, and that’s usually not such a good thing. If you’re coming in to work in this field to fix something in you, I don’t think that’s a good match. Unfortunately, a lot of people seem to be attracted to this, such as volunteers.

Do you think schools should get involved and perhaps have kids that have trouble in school participate in these programs?

Absolutely, I’m a firm believer in motivation. If you can motivate a kid, if it’s something that’s interesting to the child, you can motivate the kid if the kid is having fun. You can motivate a kid if you’re giving them responsibility for something such as a horse. There are so many things you can do in the barn that can be transferred to lessons. We don’t do that with the kids because we don’t have an educational focus in our program, but yes, there’s lots of lessons that can be brought into the barn. I know our toughest kids can come here and feel good about themselves, and if it’s for twenty minutes of the day, it’s worth it. Then the rest of the day they might think about “everybody hates me, they wanted to dump me here”, but if they can come down here for a little bit, they feel like a kid. It works for me.
Interviewee: Denise Nelson, Mustard Seed Ranch

Date: 6/29/05

Could you describe the nature of your program?

We actually have two kinds: There’s the kids, foster kids and group home kids, that come in for the day, they work really hard. I make them clean a bunch of stalls, I make them really work, rake the barn isle, feed the horses – I think it’s really important to feed, but I think it’s also really important to clean. A lot of the kids are resistant to that, they don’t want to put in a hard day’s labor. The reality is you do that or you don’t ride. So they do that, then they do some grooming before lunch, then we go back out, they learn how to lead the horse. Sometimes, I put out a trail course and we take the horses in hand and do a little trail course pattern. I experienced that to be a little easy, especially with the older kids, and it does two things. It helps the kids understand the horse’s body and how the horse moves in relation to their own body, and it also helps them when they run into a problem to get to first hand see how they handle a stressed or problematic situation. If it’s an inappropriate pattern, it’s very easy, you don’t even have to draw the conclusion, the kid will do it for you. You say, “did that work? Did you yell at the horse and did that work?” Then they come in, we do everything bareback, there’s no saddles, and the highlight of the day is at the end, when they get to ride. They do that no more than four horses at a time because I do believe it is imperative that a program like this be safe. Horses of course are inherently not safe because of their size. If I were at a riding stable, of course I could handle six of them in the ring at one time, but these kids, even though they’re actually more aggressive than your normal kids, it’s extremely important that I don’t get them hurt so that they learn to develop a trust for at least somebody. At the end of the day, we talk about what we did. After they come back, time after time, they get good pretty quickly.

Now we also have the other phase, and those are people from the Orange County Rescue Mission. They’re homeless, most of them are men. We will be rotating families through here, right now I’ve only worked with the men. They are a little bit different, not quite as aggressive as the kids. They will be living here. The men work hard, I had not had a single problem with them not working.

How long has the program operated, and how did it get started?

I’ve been here over four years. It was a vision of Tom McCall, he had that vision for about 10 to 15 years. They tried to start it in Colorado, they bought some property but the government or something happened where it wasn’t going to happen, so they sold that property and made a sufficient profit so they could pay for this outright.

What is your professional background in this type of work?
I’m a professional horse trainer, I’ve been a professional for over 15 years. I had a large riding school in Vista, we had 65 students, and maintained that level. I’m a USDF Bronze Medalist and more than that, I’m a foster parent and have been for many years. I don’t have any formal training, like when it comes to EFMHA and those kind of things, and I certainly would not want to downplay that, but sometimes I think that the kind of person that goes after that type of training is not always the type of person you want in this program. I’m a former Marine, and I take no crap. I think that’s extremely important with those kind of kids, that you’re tough – not tough, disciplined is the word I’m looking for. I’m also a competitor, I compete all the time with my Arabians.

What are the age ranges of the kids that come here?

I just had a group of seven-year olds, they were the youngest I ever had. Most of the kids are fifteen and older, 15-17.

What are some of the activities with the horses?

Quite frankly, they want to ride, they want to ride more than anything. I think when you turn it into you being “therapized”, you take away from the experience, that’s just my opinion. The horses do it, it’s not anything we’re doing. I mean, it’s not when I’m out there I’m being a therapist. I’m not, that’s not my job, let the horses do it. They’re large, they’re very emotional animals, they connect, but they’re a little scary – and that’s a really good place for some of these kids to be in. They’re tough. I recently heard someone talk about the group home kids on the radio, and he described them as fragile; I haven’t met them yet, they’re not. They’re tough, and they are aggressive, and I never met that fragile one. I think that’s a dangerous premise.

What is the overall goal of the program?

The goal is to work, to have baby-step type of goals; to achieve those goals, to achieve a level of safety and assurance on the horse – and to apply those to their lives. But also, it’s important to understand that the animals trust that I feed them every day, somebody is going to feed them every day, that they’re going to have water in the front. They don’t have the ability to cognitively process that in their mind. The animals trust me....well, in these children’s lives, a lot of their trust issues come with parents, caretakers, and things like that, and rightfully so, they are not trusting. But we still have to take that step that God has a plan for our lives, and just as those animals trust that I will come and feed them, there’s a level of trust that usually comes with maturity, that God has a plan for your life. He does have a hand in it, it might not be at the time that you have it, but that doesn’t mean He doesn’t have a plan, and it’s almost always a better plan, what He has in mind. As we work with the horses and get a little safety going, I try to bring that up. Just because they don’t see me all the time, they trust that I’m going to feed them. We don’t see God all the time, we see God in our hearts and things that happen. He is there, and he does take care of us.
Do you conduct the sessions by yourself or do you have an assistant?

It’s almost always me, we’re too far out there, but I do have an LCSW that does work with me. She’s a wonderful social worker and a very good friend of mine. We have an amazing connection, she and I. I’m the horse trainer, she’s the social worker, the therapist. When we work together, it’s a very powerful experience, it’s very good.

What are the objectives for the kids? Do they come up as you work with the kids or is it something you set up beforehand?

To be honest with you, in the group home system the kids are in and out of there so quickly, I rarely see them more than twice. It’s the same group home that comes up, but they’re different kids. I don’t understand why that is, but that’s just what it is.

What are some of the skills that youth learn in the program that would relate to life in general?

Problem-solving, for sure, because I purposely put them in situations where they’re not going to be real comfortable. Putting them outside their comfort zone. When they first come in the living room, and we talk – oh my goodness...then you get them up there, and they can hardly lead the horse. It’s an eye-opening situation that they can do something that’s completely outside of their comfort zone and be okay with it. I think that’s a huge thing in their world.

So most of the kids don’t have any horse experience?

No, and then I get one. One kid, his mother was actually a horse trainer, he was so good I could have kept him.

What are the areas where you see most growth and improvement?

Since I see other kids all the time, it’s hard to say, you’re not going to see that unless you’re in a residential program. But I do see, with some girls that came a couple of times, they went from putting on such an act (“oh, I can’t do that...”) to grabbing a horse, taking it out and brushing it all by themselves – and that’s a self-esteem thing, I do believe.

Why use horses?

They’re big – I could take a goat out here, they’re not intimidating, but the horse is. The goat is just as nice and loves humans, but the horses are big. And there is something unique about a horse. It could be the mirroring aspect, it could be that they reach out, even some horses that had a really terrible life before they came here, even those horses reach out to the kids. They want to smell them and know who they are, and I think that’s a wonderful gift with a horse. They are forgiving, but if you hurt them they are not going to take it.
What are some of the benefits of working with horses?

The benefit is huge. I’m not going to sit here and tell you that I know totally why. I don’t know totally why, but there is a difference – there’s a huge difference. When I was in private business, I had autistic kids and handicapped kids and troubled teens come to me all the time, because there is something unique about a horse. Humans and horses have been pretty tight for a long, long time, throughout our history, so God did something different about a horse that is here for us.

What are some of the challenges in this work?

Not being able to see them regularly, seeing them and so much huge potential in so many. To be honest with you, I really like most of them. They never badmouthed me, they are never aggressive with me. I like the kids, I like who they are, I like their toughness....not being able to keep them here, to let them live here – you just want to gather them all up, I’d love to have them live here.

Do you think the benefits would increase if the kids could participate on a more regular basis?

Yes, hugely. The farming life style is extremely helpful. One of my foster daughters was getting a little aggressive, and she wanted a baby goat. I said sure, but you have to feed it, just like a baby, every two hours. She started feeding that baby goat, and had to do this for two months, and I didn’t let her quit. At the end of those two months, she realized that it was a lot of work, a lot of stress, and a lot of lack of sleep. Today, we take our children so far away from real life, a nature-based life, that there’s some death in their lives. There’s no birth in their lives...Getting the milk out of a goat to make cheese with it – I’ve done that with a couple of groups, and it blows their mind, and I think it’s not a good thing that we’ve taken those kids so far from the back to basics lifestyle.

So you think the whole environment is therapeutic then?

Definitely.

Do you think there can be a connection to their behavioral and academic performance in school as a result of participating in the program?

Well, my two foster daughters came to me with straight Fs, both came to me at thirteen. Now one has As and Bs, and the other one has Cs, As and Bs – so yes....

Is there any advice you would give others in the field who are interested in this kind of work?

I think from what I see...if you have the expectation that you’re going out there and fix these kids, you’re in trouble. That’s not the plan...you can be a guide, you can be of
help, you can interject your opinion and show them your own life, and if it makes a little bit of difference in one or two, that’s huge. It probably won’t make a difference in most of them, and you need to understand that. I mean, the biggest problem I have when people come to volunteer, it’s almost overloaded with energy, and within a day or two, they say, “well, this isn’t working...”. This is working, but on a very laid back, slow, quiet schedule, and that’s the way it has to be. You can’t take them in, pull them off the street, and say, “well, here you go, you’re done....”. It’s a process, and it’s slow, and there are tiny little steps involved. Those steps are the most important thing, it’s the road. You’re going from abused teenager to what? You have a hundred different picks there, all the way from drug addict and alcoholic and prostitute to doctor all the way up here, but every road is baby steps, and you can take little tiny steps to be that drug addict or maybe something that may be a little more productive.

Do you think this program works better for some than others or is it uniform across the board?

I can’t say, I have no access to their backgrounds.

In summary, would you say that a program such as yours can effectively change some of the attitudes, skills and behaviors, given sufficient time?

Yes, definitely....I think it’s the only thing out there. I don’t think other programs that are not animal-based work. There are many people out there doing animal programs in the prisons. We are so egocentric, and we think that every thing needs to be human based. Everything on this planet has a use. The animals all have a powerful use, they have a powerful part in our lives, and I think when we try to spend our lives without that part, that’s not the plan.
Interviewee: Sharon Tavaglione, Rubidoux High School

Date: 6/20/05

Could you describe the nature of your program?

The horsemanship class is part of the Future Farmers of America (FFA) program conducted here at Rubidoux High School. It is a two semester program with students participating in the class 55 minutes per day. Students receive P.E. credits for completing the class which is conducted after physical education standards.

How long has this program operated?

It is currently in its 10th year, I have taught the horsemanship class here for 5 years.

What are some of the activities and learning objectives for your students?

Students learn basic horsemanship as well as animal behavior. They start out learning how to halter, lead and groom a horse, but we also try to understand animal behavior and do round pen activities, for example. The ultimate goal is to get on a horse and learn how to ride, but many other activities are just as important.

What are some life-related skills youth learn?

Learning how to understand behavior, that’s a big thing, and empathy. They begin to appreciate that horses don’t have any say in what we’re doing to them, and in some ways they can relate to that to their own lives, that they don’t always have control over what’s happening to them. They learn real quick that intimidation doesn’t work with a horse. There’s a time and a place with a horse to be strict, and you definitely don’t want to let these guys take advantage of you. They learn real quick that they have to take control, I would try to relate it a lot to parenting skills. I would tell them that if you can’t make this horse do the basic things you want, what are you going to do if it’s a four year old and you’re in a grocery store? I try to build on what they can take away that they can use in the rest of their lives. I always tell them the chances of you riding for the rest of your lives are probably pretty slim, maybe on a vacation you rent a horse and feel you have a little bit more control because you know what’s going on, but hopefully they take something out of here that makes us all a little better person. We spent quite a bit of time with the mare and foal and reproduction because you can deal with reproduction with the kids and it is safe, we’re using the same words and body parts, everything is relative. I’m always a little surprised about how little the girls understand about their own bodies, and yet here they are having sex. I think repro is a huge area. In my advanced class, a couple of years ago, they got real relaxed and comfortable and talking, and I told them they could say anything they want, it’s just horses. One of the girls raised her hand and the question was something along the lines of: “If a boy horse and a girl horse are in hot tub...”, and it went from there. But you can see that it gave an environment where it was okay to ask that question, and that was huge.
Are their any indications that this is not just fun time with horses, but that they make connections to their lives?

I think so. The responsibility, the idea that they are totally dependent on us. I always show Black Beauty in the beginning of the year. While it is told from the horses’s standpoint, it drives home the fact that they don’t have any control over who owns them. All they can do is respond to the input we give them, they are not rational thinking creatures, so they can’t say: “Well, today so-and-so is in a bad mood, so I better stay away....” They don’t think like that, and getting the kids to the point that they recognize that a horse only responds to the input and they’re responding with what instinct tells them to do. Instinct tells them, don’t let people ride you, instinct tells them don’t let people come up from behind you, run away from things that are scary. When we start to look at why they respond the way they do, what did mother nature give them that tells them to run away from things that are scary, then why is it so hard to predict that when we did something that was scary in the arena they ran? So it makes them stop and think about what instincts tell them, and then we spend some time on the fact that training is really just trust, at any level, whether it’s dogs or cats or horses. When you’re teaching a young horse to be ridden instinct tells them to buck because things on their back would be something like a mountain lion or a predator. Now we’re asking them to give the ultimate sacrifice and to submit to a predator, and when the kids make that connection, a light bulb goes on, all of the sudden they go, “oh my gosh, it took all the trust this horse had to understand I’m not gonna hurt them.” So those kinds of connections, they don’t happen a lot, but when they happen, they’re huge.

What are reasons to use horses in the areas of human development?

They have done studies in advertising that if they use a horse, viewer response goes up tremendously. There’s always been some kind of a fascination between man and horse. It’s the only animal that we have completely domesticated the way we have the horse, not just a pet, but we have used them for work, we developed this strange relationship with them versus any other animal. I think that it’s the horse, they are so different from other animals, there is some kind of a bond that I don’t know if anybody could ever explain. We all knew the horse crazy girl growing up, or we were that girl, I think there’s just something different about a horse. I team rope, my husband and I team rope, and the kids are real familiar with that because they’re with us for the events, and I know that the two horses I use, when I ask for it, they give me 110% every time I ask. You just don’t get that kind of commitment from a person that you can get from an animal, mostly dogs and horses. I think the kids, when they get to where they can see that, it’s a big connection.

Do you think horses serve as a mirror to the kids’ action by giving immediate feedback? Do you think there’s a value in that?
Absolutely, I think the round pen time is just the ideal set-up to show that, the whole idea of intimidation versus asking and making sure that what we’re asking is the message we’re trying to send. I’ve videotaped people riding in different arenas and I’ll say, “What do you think this person was asking the horse to do? And now, by looking at the video, what was the rider’s body asking the horse to do?” Sometimes, the message was never anywhere near the same. The horse can only give the input we give it to work with, so I think that when they start to understand the difference between developing trust...the round pen is just a really big thing for that because they get immediate feedback. Horses don’t like to be alone, and all of a sudden it’s that kid or nobody, and that’s a real ego booster with anybody when that horse walks up and says, okay, you can be by herd. I think even more than riding time, in the round pen the concept is working with instinct and understanding what their behavior is going to tell them to do because of it, and then trying to override it with trust. I think that’s a big connection with the kid.

Have you had any feedback that the kids’ behavior or academics are impacted?

That’s a hard one to measure. I know that I do a lot of IEPs with special needs kids, a lot of them are not physically disabled but have some emotional issues. I consistently see that their grades in my class are higher. I’m not asking about the academics, we’re not using it as a threat, like if you don’t complete math you can’t be in horsemanship, so that’s a hard one to measure. But I know we have kids that sweat bullets to get their grades up so that they can compete in the whole program [Future Farmers of America], go to the fairs, etc. So I see the academic pressure, that they really start to perform and see that grades matter, because we don’t take them anywhere if they don’t perform.

Do you think a few kids will take this experience and build on that?

Absolutely, in different ways, too. Like I said, it may not come back to them right away, but I think the empathy and things like that, whether they’ll ever own a horse or not, I think, and maybe for one in four, the light bulb turns on and there’s something in their heart that changes, and they’re a little kinder and softer.

Do you see a change throughout the semester, especially in the “tough guys”?

The horses are kind of an equalizer, it’s hard to be a bad ass to a horse when they’re so much bigger and stronger. I think more than the tough kids, they soften up, the timid kids, the withdrawn kids, they probably get more because they learn they have control of something, they get a bunch too. We all want to look at the hard core kids that want to be the tough ones and not respond to us and have that cold shoulder and yes, they all soften up. It may not be the mucho thing to show the teacher...I really see it with the Hispanic boys. More than once I had to take a boy to the side and said, “look, I know that culturally taking direction from women is not a good thing for you, but this is the bottom line...” Most of these kids, one-on-one they’re fine, and I can see them soften up in class. They may do their little mucho thing, but we both know the soft side is
there, when it’s appropriate it’ll come up. With the horses, they will be less demanding
and more asking, then they start to realize that in the round pen just where they stand
influences the outcome of what they get in return, and their body language and things,
I think they get something out of that.

Do you think it increases their overall awareness and sensitivity?

Yes, I think so. The other thing, in my advanced class for kids I have more than one
year, I always tell them they amaze me. The first six weeks we kind of get to know
each other, and they’ve been in class together for all their lives, and for whatever
reason, the playing field is leveled here. By late October, in this class it’s okay to talk
to people you normally wouldn’t talk to on campus, I tell them this all the time, “I
know you two don’t say two words to each other out on campus”, it’s not cool to talk
to each other whether this one is a geek or this one is a whatever...when they’re in
here, they’re kind to each other, and they’re helpful and they’re supportive, and that
one continually amazes me. I’ve seen it every year in my advanced class, that they
really form a bond and they help each other out, and while they still have their little
groups that they hang out with, they’re kind to everybody and they all recognize their
role in getting chores and stuff done. We still have a few lazy ones, but they even
know they’re lazy.

Any other comments or remarks that you think would be helpful for people to look at
and to consider when doing this kind of work?

I feel really fortunate to have a job like this. I had quit teaching and was just riding full
time, and this school called me and asked me if I wanted to come back to teaching. At
first I didn’t think so because the FFA stuff takes up so much time with our
commitment to traveling with our horses, sometimes it’s a balancing act, but very few
people get to combine two things they love the way I do. There are days when I walk
out here and ask, what was I thinking? I don’t believe that any teacher should ask a kid
to do something that they won’t do beside them, and I think that’s one of the reasons
why I get a good respect. I’m not one to direct but I’ll work right next to them, like
“let’s go clean the waterers out.” They know that’s when they get into the most trouble
when they all look around and I’m the only one on the farm working, that’s when they
better duck, because that’s what makes me madder than anything.

I think that when you can put aside the bureaucracy, the liability and all of those things
aside, there’s a huge value in kids and horses, and all the different kinds of kids, the
tough kids, the timid kids, the outgoing kids – it’s just so leveling as a playing field
because most of them come in with just so little background....it’s kind of like the
military, they come in and everybody is at a loss of what to do, and everybody is
smaller than the horse. I don’t care if you’re the biggest kid in class, that horse is still
stronger than you are. I think they get an awareness of safety, I hope that they get a big
awareness of what’s going on around them. They start noticing details, you know, they
start catching each other with loose cinches, things not tied right – then I know that
things are working when I see them noticing. That’s always something I try to write in letters of recommendation for them - as an employment skill, having someone who pays attention to details is a huge skill to have, so I try to tie it into things like that. It’s too bad there aren’t more ways to fund programs, and more space.

Do you think there should be more schools and after-school programs that offer a horse program?

Absolutely, I think there is a lot of value in it. We’re getting farther and farther away from our agricultural roots which is what this really comes back to, yet agriculture in Southern California as a class/school subject is one of the fastest growing. We have 22,000 kids enrolled in FFA in Southern California, and you can see what they get out of it. I think that any time we go back to the basics we do our kids a favor. It’s really sad when they don’t know where that food came from in the grocery store. I think that if an administrator, or those who make decisions, could see what happens in a round pen when that horse hooks up, wants to be part of that person’s herd, and that that kid realizes how sensitive and how little input it takes to get a horse to do what they want, once they understand - I think that anybody who saw that would think there’s a connection.

It’s so expensive to run - I’m sure it costs us $5,000 a year or more to run this program, but if you saved one kid, that’s kind of money well spent. I have a friend who sent their son to one of those boot camps, that was $15,000 a month, but he said if he goes out and gets drunk or something and kills someone, how much is $15,000 in the big picture? We have one kid, I wish you could meet him, the only thing that’s kept him straight in school is he found this and he loves it. He’ll build a career, he’ll apprentice this summer with horseshoeing, but he’ll be the first one to tell you coming in here as a freshman he was target-rich environment for gang members or any kind of problems. I know this program kept him out of trouble. He’ll tell the administrators, “if it wasn’t for FFA, I wouldn’t be in high school.” I know we have some kids that have trouble fitting in, whatever their issues are, the horses don’t care. This is a safe environment, that’s why my advanced kids bond so well because it’s totally safe, because what happens on the farm stays on the farm. It really is okay to be friends with people you otherwise wouldn’t look at.

In high school, there has to be something for all of them. They know for a fact that if a kid makes any kind of connection, whether it’s FFA or band or sports, the chances of them being successful go way up. California’s dirty little secret in education is that we supposedly have a 5% dropout rate. Well, you tell me how we get 900 kids in as freshmen and graduate 450, and yet we have a 10% dropout rate. Just because they go to home schooling or the C-school, how many of those kids complete these programs? I think we’re kidding ourselves thinking our kids are successful.
Interviewee: Richard Troy, Inner City Slickers

Date: 10/10/05

Could you describe your program?

The Inner City Slicker program is a program designed to help children, it’s strictly for children to help them become better people and get better understanding in their lives. We teach them several different things over the weekend that they’re here such as roping, riding, caring for one another. We give them things to do by themselves, and during campfires in the evening they get to open up and give us an inside look at themselves, and it’s strictly themselves and not something that someone else is telling them. We normally take them from ages 10 to 17 because right at that time in a child’s life they’re open to go on either side of the fence, good or bad, committing crimes or not committing crimes, and we try to get them to learn a profession, something they really enjoy doing. If you don’t enjoy doing what you’re doing, you’re not going to do it good. We teach them to become respectful, respect other people as you respect yourself and always respect yourself. We give them the opportunity of coming to us one on one and asking us questions, any kind of questions that they want to ask. Each kid will benefit from it. As they enter the program, they’re skeptical, they don’t know what they’re getting into. We explain that to them, and we tell them there’s no such thing as “no” on our ranch. We will never have them do anything that will get them in danger or hurt, we put enough people there to prevent that. Like with our horseback riding, we’ll have three wranglers with one person riding a horse on a trail, one leading and one on each side of the horse. We have different people that come, we have veterinarians, trainers, all those people who put their part in to help them with that. When they go through the program, they don’t want to go home. They’re always welcome back, we have some that have come for ten years. We make them junior wranglers and they become people who help us with the other children because sometimes a child can understand a child better than they can understand a grownup. We teach them what work is and how to care for your animals. Your animals are number one, you feed them before you eat, make sure they’re watered and taken care of.

How long have you been involved in this program?

I helped originate this program in 1994, I was one of the very first people. We took the children to a camp in Malibu for a weekend.

What made you want to be involved in a program like this?

I want to help the kids, help them be better people, because they’re our leaders tomorrow, and we want to try to help put them in that position.

What do you hope the kids will get out of a program such as this?
The ways to manufacture themselves a better life, to make them better people, more understanding. I’ve encountered kids ten years later that have come to me and said, “I remember coming to your place ten years ago, I loved it, can I come back?” It makes you feel good.

What are some of the activities that the kids engage in, and why do you select these activities?

We put a lot of emphasis on horseback riding because it’s very important to them to learn horseback riding. Horses become part of the people, people become part of the horses, they remember it for all their life, and horses do something to people. You know a horse becomes part of you inside, the way you understand them and you feel for them. Another activity we teach them is roping because it’s a matter of concentration on what you’re doing. We teach them bull riding on a mechanical bull, a barrel that’s mounted on telephone poles with garage door springs on it. It’s like a bucking bull, the way we manipulate it you’ve got to concentrate on that riding, the way you work your body.

Does fear play a role when it comes to these activities?

Oh yes, the kids are so scared. Let me give you an example from juvenile hall. One of the girls stood there and said, “no, I’m not going to ride on that stupid horse.” I told her to just stay there and watch the other girls. I started to put the girls on my horse, teaching them how to ride and then letting them ride around on their own. After a while, the girl asked if I’d mind if she’d try it now. I said, “heavens, no, get on.” After I got her on the horse, she didn’t want to get off. At the end of the day, before we left, that girl came back to me and said, “can I say bye to you, and can I say bye to the horse?” She kissed that horse four or five times before she’d get away from it. The next week, we were at a different juvenile hall, and that same girl happened to be one of the kids. When they came out, she was screaming my name, coming at me: “Can I be in your posse? Can I be in your posse?” That is the effect of the horses on people, that’s what horses do to the kids. I loved every bit of it, I got something from her and she got something from me.

What are some of the skills that the kids learn?

They pick up the skills that we teach them, it’s important to know how to clean a stable. There’s a hard way and an easy way to do it. While they are doing the cleaning, I talk to them, correct them when they’re doing it wrong and pat them on the back when they are doing it right.

What are some of the changes you see in the kids during a weekend?

Let me give you an example. We had one boy, he was sixteen years old. At the end of the day, we give each kid the opportunity of talking about what they got out of the weekend. This kid said: “I would like to say something for everyone here to pass it
along. When I came here last Friday, I had an attitude, I had a terrible attitude. Spending this time here, my attitude has totally turned around. Right now, I don’t want to go back, I just want to stay at the ranch. I’ve learned so much just being here.” It’s everything, the activities we do, the people and other kids they meet.

What are some of the things they kids take away from here?

It’s a continuation of what they’ve learned. We tell them that you should learn something the best way you could possibly learn it, and then pass it along to someone else. That will make this a better place to live for all of us. They will pass along some things they’ve learned right here on this ranch. Things happen right here to these kids they won’t forget for as long as they live. I still have contact with some of the kids and they tell me that all the time. Some are married and have kids of their own now.

Why use horses? What do the horses provide that makes this unique?

I have a saying I use that the inside of a horse is like the outside of a man, and they all go together. Once you come in contact with a horse, you become a different person. Horses mirror the person’s attitude, that’s one of the purposes of it.

Do you think the kids transfer some of the lessons they learn here back to their daily lives?

Absolutely. I’ve talked with children later after they’ve been to the ranch and they tell me about what they’ve learned up here.

Do you see any change in the areas of respect and trust?

I see those changes constantly, with every group we have up here. Just with working with them and talking to them. They are so much more cooperative when they leave here, they just open up. We don’t try to make cowboys out of them, that’s not the idea – it’s to be better people.

What are some of the challenges in this work, and are there things that are not working?

I can’t think of anything that’s not working. Some children don’t want to be part of it at first, but then you can’t get them away from the horse. The things we’re doing are working awfully good, that’s why I stayed with it.

Would you agree that these changes are difficult to measure?

We can definitely see it, but it’s impossible to measure because it’s something that happens inside them. But people recognize it, their parents recognize it, they’ve called me and written me letters about the changes in their kids. One of the officers in juvenile hall has told me that after we’ve come to the juvenile hall, the kids that were in our program behave much better and even try to influence the other kids. The have a
much better attitude. They always ask us when we can come back. I think that’s important right there.

Would you say that participating in this program can have long-lasting effects?

From all the reports I’ve gotten back, that’s a definite.

Do you have the kids process and share their experiences with the group?

At the end of the program, we have all of them sit down with the wranglers, and every child has the opportunity to speak. We ask them, “what have you learned from this program?” They tell you, and it’s amazing.

What advice would you give others interested in this kind of work?

The best thing is to respect and love the kids, understand where they can go wrong and have gone wrong, and help them get out of it and become better people. Be ready to work hard, because then the children will work hard. It gets their mind off other things, especially the ones that are in a shell or scared.

Do you think if the kids had more opportunities to participate in such programs you would see even more changes?

I believe so, yes. The more they are part of it, the more change will happen. Being in a different environment is the key, it’s the first thing. We make it all come together, try to get the kids to understand it. It might take some time, it took us about 20 minutes one time to get a kid on the horse. He was scared, and I would hold his hand once he got on and someone else would lead the horse on the lead line, and we’d keep talking to him. After a few moments, he was riding the horse around by himself, big Mariposa. He was riding that horse around five or six times alone, he didn’t want to get off. Now right there, we broke through to that kid, and before he left he came over and said, “Mister, you really taught me a lot, I really enjoyed this.” This was in juvenile hall, I don’t know why he was there, but I do know he learned something, and I do know one thing, I learned something from it. There’s a lot of young people there that should not be there.

Is one of your objectives to provide the kids with good memories and have fun experiences?

Oh yes, they will remember it as long as they live.

Is there anything you would like to add we haven’t talked about?

We need more programs such as this. We are planning to set up several more locations and I’m working with different people to hopefully make it happen.
APPENDIX C

HORSE PROGRAM MODEL
Proposed Model

Horses & At-risk Youth: An Alternative Approach to Reconnect Adolescents
Some people see a closed door and turn away.

Others see a closed door, try the knob,
    If it doesn’t open...
    They turn away.

Still others see a closed door, try the knob,
    If it doesn’t open,
    They find a key.
    If the key doesn’t fit...
    They turn away.

A rare few see a closed door,
    Try the knob,
    If it doesn’t open,
    They find a key.
    If the key doesn’t fit...
    They make one.

Author unknown
PROGRAM RATIONALE

Statement of Student Need

At-risk youth are typically characterized by low academic achievement and behavioral issues. For many at-risk students, school failure has become the norm, not an exception. They have disengaged and become alienated from school, making it difficult for teachers to reach them. We often realize that remedial instruction, asking the students to “try harder”, or “more of the same”, is not effective. In addition, individual and social risk factors such as truancy, delinquency, drug and alcohol use, gang involvement and learning disabilities contribute to the at-risk teens’ disengagement from the mainstream population.

In order to re-engage these adolescents, educators need to consider the “bigger picture” and look at the whole child. We cannot teach a student to whom this instruction is meaningless or worthless. The best lesson might not be the one in a book, but one we use to instill self-confidence and self worth. Within the context of traditional classroom instruction which focuses predominantly on teaching content, however, there is little room for teaching “life lessons”. In order to do so, we should consider and develop alternative methods or programs to effectively meet the needs of at-risk and high-risk students. Our primary task at hand is to develop adolescents who can and want to succeed in school and, ultimately, in life.

Theoretical Background

Therapeutic riding has been used since the 1950s as a tool for improving the lives of individuals with physical and mental disabilities. As this field emerged, it became apparent that considerable improvement was also observed on the cognitive and emotional level. It has been recognized that the benefits of equine assisted activities are as numerous as the types of disabilities and conditions that participants present. Individuals with almost any cognitive, physical and/or emotional disability can benefit from therapeutic riding or other purposeful, safe and supervised interaction with equines.

Students who participate in equine assisted activities can experience cognitive, emotional and mental growth. Recognizing the benefits of equine therapy for patients with a variety of psychological difficulties, a group of therapists formed the Equine-Facilitated Mental Health Association (EFMHA) for professionals in the field of equine facilitated experiential learning (EFEL) and equine assisted therapies (EAT). Today, from California to Florida, treatment facilities are offering equine-facilitated therapy to help people with everything from drug addiction to cancer recovery.

A closer look at existing horse programs offered for teens reveals a wide spectrum of different programs, such as:
- Weekend camps focusing on horsemanship and riding
- Horsemanship classes offered at high schools (often within a 4-H or Future Farmers of America program)
- Resident programs at foster care providers and juvenile placement facilities
- Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy
- Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Activities (such as those offered for special education students in connection with school activities)

The proposed horse program utilizes components of several of these programs in an attempt to incorporate best practices that are appropriate for our goals and objectives.

**Why Horses?**

Those who are familiar with horses – from cowboys to therapists – recognize and understand their power to influence people in incredibly different ways. Developing relationships, training, horsemanship instruction, and caring for the horses naturally affects the people involved in meaningful ways.

Horses naturally provide the benefits of work ethic, responsibility, assertiveness, communication and healthy relationships. In addition, horses are large and powerful and might naturally be intimidating to some people. Accomplishing a task involving the horse, in spite of those fears, creates confidence and provides for wonderful metaphors when dealing with intimidating and challenging situations in life.

Horses require work, whether in caring for them or working with them. During a time when immediate gratification and the “easy way” are the norm, horses require students to be engaged in physical and mental work to be successful, a valuable characteristic in all aspects of life.

Above all, horses have the ability to mirror exactly what human body language is telling them. Since horses are prey animals, their survival in the wild has depended on their keen instincts and sensitivity to their environment. Horses have a way of seeing right through you; they see your fear, your feelings of inadequacy, or your sorrow according to current practitioners in the field. Some people might complain that “the horse is stubborn”, or that “it doesn’t like me,” etc. The lesson to be learned, however, is that if they change themselves, the horses respond differently. Horses are honest and have no hidden agenda, which makes them especially powerful messengers.

**Expected benefits of Equine-assisted Experiential Learning**

The proposed horse program’s activities fall within the framework of experiential education where participants learn by doing, outside a traditional classroom environment. It occurs when a person is interacting with the environment, including the people, animals and situations involved. Experiential learning provides opportunities for at-risk students to strengthen their self-concept by achieving success
and accomplishments in meaningful activities. Reported benefits consist of an enhancement of students’ self-esteem and improvement of life skills.

In the case of equine-assisted learning, experts have concluded that participants may experience a number of benefits which help participants in all areas of their lives to become better citizens and increase their achievement. Among those benefits are:

- **Confidence:** The learning and mastery of a new skill – horsemanship – enhances participants’ confidence in their ability to tackle new projects and leads to improved self-esteem.

- **Self-Efficacy:** Learning to communicate and achieve harmony with a large animal promotes feelings of efficacy. The student is motivated (“I can do it!”) as opposed to lacking motivation which can lead the student to take on challenges in other areas.

- **Communication:** Horses’ sensitivity to non-verbal communication helps students to develop a greater awareness of their emotions and non-verbal communication.

- **Trust:** Learning to trust a big animal such as a horse as well as other participants also helps in the development or restoration of trust in others.

- **Assertiveness:** Communicating effectively with a horse requires a rider to demonstrate assertiveness, direction, and initiative - all important skills which allow our students to express themselves more effectively.

- **Teamwork:** Students work with each other as well as instructors to accomplish a common goal.

- **Kinesthetic and tactile experiences:** Traditional classroom experiences cannot include movement and touch – students can experience all senses while interacting with horses.

- **Self-acceptance:** Horses don’t care what someone looks like or what a person’s status is – they simply react to how the person treats them and can be a source of unconditional acceptance.

- **Healthy recreational activities:** At-risk teens often lack the experience of participating in and planning recreational activities that are simply fun; they learn to try out new activities.
PURPOSE & OUTCOME OF THE PROGRAM

The proposed horse program consists of two major educational components: The horsemanship component and the life skills component where students learn essential life skills to increase their achievement and facilitate reintegration into society. This model intends to provide essential strategies for at-risk youth by helping them gain competencies, develop self-confidence and learn how to become a better citizen.

The purpose of this program is to meet the following specific goals & objectives:

A. Horsemanship Component:

Goals: 1. Students will learn basic horsemanship and riding skills, including the care and management of horses.

2. Students are exposed to non-traditional vocations in the equine industry.

Objectives:
1. Students will be able to perform routine skills involved in the daily care and management of horses such as feeding, cleaning, health care, exercising and grooming.
2. Students will be familiar with basic horse terminology and equipment.
3. Students will be able to lead and control a horse from the ground.
4. Students will be able to saddle and bridle a horse.
5. Students will be able to demonstrate basic riding skills by being able to execute various patterns in the arena at various gaits.
6. Students will become knowledgeable of various careers in the horse industry such as horseshoer, groom, veterinary assistant, trainer, breeder, racetrack operator, etc.

B. Life Skills Component:

Goals: 1. To provide an effective, alternative, experiential behavioral intervention program that engages the at-risk students physically, mentally and emotionally.
2. To develop and improve life and citizenship skills, work ethic and attitude of at-risk students.

Objectives:
1. Students will be able to follow directions and work with others to accomplish a common goal.
2. Students will develop greater awareness of their emotions and non-verbal communication.
3. Students will be able to demonstrate effective communication skills including assertiveness, direction and initiative.
4. Students will learn and master a new skill - horsemanship - which enhances their confidence in new projects and increases self-esteem.
5. Students will learn to respect and trust a big animal and other participants which aids in their development or restoration of trust in others.
6. Students will develop and improve problem-solving skills and creative thinking.
7. Students will demonstrate increased motivation and work ethic.
8. Students will be able to make a connection between what they have learned with the horses and success in the classroom and other areas of their lives (transference of learning to other settings).

METHODOLOGY

Scope of the Program

For this program, sixteen students will be selected to participate in the horse program which will be conducted over three months. It offers a minimum of four sessions with each session lasting two days. Additional sessions are encouraged to reinforce learning in the classroom as well as hands-on practice.

Four suitable and carefully selected horses are brought to the facility for each session and stay overnight at the facility. This allows the students to experience horse care and management as well as all chores involved in their care, an important part of their learning. Appropriate pens are set up to insure safe and secure housing of the animals.

All activities are coordinated, supervised and evaluated by the program director. In addition, horse experts conduct and supervise the horsemanship and riding lessons for the students. Additional staff is utilized to insure safety and proper supervision (i.e. horse-knowledgeable volunteers).

The activities involving horse contact and handling/riding will be conducted in the appropriate enclosures. For example, groundwork will be taught in the roundpen, and riding activities will take place in the arena designed for that purpose. While the materials for these enclosures might constitute a considerable expense, they are an absolute necessity to ensure an appropriate environment that is safe and controllable.

With all activities, the safety and well being of all participants, humans and horses, is the primary concern. Only horses suitable for novice handlers/riders will be selected to participate in this program. All contact with the horses will be directly supervised by experienced horsemen (and -women) and additional staff. When not in use, all equipment and horse facilities will be secured. Participants will wear appropriate riding attire consisting of jeans, boots, and a safety helmet. Should a participant not agree with the rules and safety regulations prior to or during the program, he will be removed from the program immediately.
Activities

The activities in this project fall within Equine Facilitated Experiential Learning, an emerging field in which horses are used as a tool for emotional and cognitive growth and learning. Participants learn about themselves and others by participating in activities with the horses and then processing behaviors, feelings and patterns.

The schedule below is a general outline of planned activities. They may be modified, built upon and supplemented by other activities as the program evolves. A variety of lessons and problem-solving activities can be used to enhance learning.

Activities: Sample Schedule of Activities

SESSION I:

Day 1:

8:00 AM to Lunch:
- Orientation:
  - “Code of Conduct”: Rules & expectations (incl. treatment of horses)
  - Myths vs. facts: What is a cowboy? What do we know about horses?
  - Words to review (respect, trust, communication, determination, “cowboy up”, leadership, teamwork, etc.)
  - Intro to activities, wranglers and horses
  - Horse & handler safety demonstration
  - Assign teams and leaders
- Basic horsemanship:
  - Haltering and leading a horse: Demo and practice
  - Demo: Grooming a horse
  - Introduction to groundwork: Roundpen demo & practice
  - Intro to tack, saddling and bridling a horse
  - Riding demonstration
- Group meeting: Review & announcement of afternoon activities; participants then feed horses carrots, check water, talk to wranglers and get to know horses.

Lunch break

1:00 PM to 2:30 PM:
- Group meeting: Announcements & Assignment of Activities:
- Group A: Two groups (with 8 boys total) are assigned horses and, with guidance and supervision of wranglers, will groom and saddle their horses (two boys per horse). This group will then receive basic riding instruction and practice in the arena (sidewalkers provided individually).
- Group B: The other two groups will learn and practice how to rope using hay barrel “dummies”. If they finish early, they will watch Group A.
2:30 PM to 4:00 PM:
- Groups switch activities.

4:00 PM to 4:30 PM:
- Horses are untacked, brushed and put away. Feeding and cleanup
- Equipment put away and secured

4:45 PM to 5:30 PM:
- Wrap-up (Processing/reflective component): Group talk/share activity about the day’s events, learning experiences, etc. guided by instructor. Completion of journal entries and record books.

Optional:
7:00 PM – 9:00 PM:
- Evening indoor activity to immerse participants in the world of horses.
  Potential activities: Intro to careers in the horse industry with guest speaker from the horse industry; horse videos; conduct a “horse fair” with info on breeds, history and variety of uses for horses; arts & crafts/creative writing, etc.

Day 2:

AM:
- Feeding horses and mucking stalls; set up equipment and supplies
- Orientation to activities & review of safety procedures
- Practice skills learned previous day:

  Group A: Practice roping skills. If finished early, they will watch others.

  Group B: Halter, groom and tack up horses; then practice independent riding skills and learn to execute a basic pattern through cones/barrels.

  - Groups switch activities. Group B then untacks and puts away horses for lunch.

Lunch break

PM: “It’s showtime!”

- Students get to show off their new skills by putting on a demonstration for the others of skills learned.

  Each participant will be announced and receives points for his performance, riding and roping. Together with points earned while practicing horsemanship skills throughout the weekend, participants accumulate points toward their certificate of completion.

  This activity is not so much based on competition but rather intended to motivate the boys to put forth their best efforts.
- Horses are untacked, brushed and put away. Feeding and cleanup. Wrap-up, share activity, reflection, evaluation, completion of record books and journal writing by participants.
- Clean-up & good-byes.

SESSION II - IV:

These 2-day sessions repeat the warm-up and closing activities of the previous sessions. Besides providing practice of previously learned skills, they will feature the following activities as basic skills progress:

- Controlling a horse from the ground in the roundpen
- Groom and tack the horse (incl. knowledge of tack)
- Riding specific patterns in the arena at all three gaits (walk, trot, lope).
- Riding bareback
- Barrel racing
- Roping of dummies and livestock from the ground

FINAL ACTIVITY: Western Horse Show & BBQ

In front of invited guests and parents, students have the opportunity to show off their newly learned skills during a Horse Show. This will be a big event featuring several riding and roping demonstrations in which all students participate, including barrel racing and roping of livestock. During the final award ceremony, all participants receive a Certificate of Completion as well as a trophy. In addition, ribbons for the winners of the barrel racing event are awarded. A traditional BBQ is served to all participants, staff and guests.

**Evaluation Plan**

Students' learning and outcome of the program is evaluated as follows:

- Pre- and post-testing of students:

Students complete an evaluation record of Horse and Life Skills at the beginning and end of the program. This will be a self-evaluation instrument based on the targeted objectives. It asks the participants to rate themselves using a Likert scale of measurement, true/false questions, as well as open-ended questions. Furthermore, students complete a final evaluation with open-ended questions where they can share and comment on their experiences in detail.

- Student completion of a Record Book/Journal:

Each student receives a Record Book/Journal in which they can assess and reflect on their learning. It will include checklists for skills to be learned (horsemanship as well as life skills) together with writing prompts encouraging tracking their goals, progress
and reflection. Special emphasis is put on processing the life skills learned while working with the horses and prompting students to make the connection to other areas of their lives.

- **Staff Anecdotal Records and Observations:**

During the program, staff will keep anecdotal records of the progress of the students which will be summarized and evaluated at the end of the program. The staff observation logs include specific questions that address changes in attitude and behavior during and as a result of the program.

- **Final evaluation:**

At the end of the program, the data from all evaluation instruments is analyzed and compared. In order to determine the overall outcome and success of the program, results are categorized and examined regarding the following questions:

- Were the learning goals and objectives met?
- Which areas showed the most growth?
- What are the key findings?
- What are secondary findings?
- Were there additional or unexpected results?
- Which parts or activities were most effective? Which were least effective?
- How should the model be modified or supplemented?

Sample forms and evaluation instruments are attached. They include:

- Participant Application
- Safety & Commitment Contract
- Learning Goals & Objectives
- Student Pre- and Post-Test
- Journal Writing Prompts
- Skills Grade Sheet
- Staff Observation Log
- Final Student Evaluation
- Final Staff Evaluation
TPR Horse Program:
Application to Participate

Last Name: ___________________ First Name: ___________ DOB: ___________

Program info

The horse program will take place during eight all-day sessions. In addition, participants take part in special classroom sessions and instruction, workshops and demonstrations.

A maximum of 16 students will be admitted to this program. It will teach basic horsemanship (how to handle and take care of horses), ranch maintenance, roping and riding skills – and in the process, you will learn a great deal about yourself. After completing the program, you will receive a Certificate of Completion, Vocational Education Credits, and a chance to demonstrate your newly learned skills for invited guests at our horse show.

Requirements & Expectations:

- You need to commit to the entire length of the program (2 1/2 months) and agree to participate in all activities to the best of your abilities, outdoors and indoors.

- You need to be willing to try new things and follow all staff directions readily. This will ensure the safety and well-being of all participants (humans and horses) and your success in the program. Wearing safety helmets during riding activities is a must.

- When you are admitted, you will be expected to agree to sign a contract to complete the program.

If there are more applicants than the maximum number of available spots at this time, we will choose the participants based on screening interviews, your letter of application (to be completed on page two of this form), and other criteria.

I agree to participate in this program as described above:

_________________________________________ ________________________
Student Signature Date

→ Please also write a short response to the questions on page 2 of this form →
Letter of Application:

Why would you like to participate in the horse program?

__________________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________

Do you have any experience with horses (not a requirement)? Yes____ No____

If yes, please describe: ______________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________

Are you currently in a vocation? No____ Yes____ Instructor___________________________

Are you willing to be a “stand-by” participant? Yes_____ No____

What makes you a good candidate for this program? ____________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________
TPR Horse Program: Participant Safety Contract & Commitment

By signing this contract below, you agree to comply with all rules and regulations of the program to ensure the safety and well-being of all participants, humans and horses alike, as well as your success in this program. In addition, you commit to participate to your best abilities in all parts of this program for its entire length.

The rules and regulations are as follows:

1. **Follow all instructors and staff directions.** Listen and act promptly – it will keep you safe and help you learn.
2. **All Twin Pines Ranch rules apply during this program.** These are the rules you previously signed when you arrived – don’t forget you agreed to them.
3. **Follow all “Horse Sense Rules”**. These rules are included in this manual and demonstrated at the beginning of the first session.
4. **All activities take place in the designated areas under proper supervision only.** Participants need to stay within the designated areas for their group at all times with staff present. Mounting and riding the horses is only allowed when you’re told to do so.
5. **Wear appropriate clothing including helmets as instructed.** This will further keep you safe and is a requirement. All riders must wear helmets at all times.
6. **Treat all staff, fellow participants and horses with respect and appropriately.** No further explanation should be necessary – kindness goes a long way with every living being...
7. **Participate in all activities to the best of your abilities.** Your willingness to try new things will help you succeed – in this program and life in general. Give it your all.
8. **Complete all questionnaires, tests and writing assignments.** We need to find out what you learned about horsemanship and yourself in this program – although probably not your favorite part, it is extremely important!
9. **Failure to comply with these rules and regulations will result in your removal from the program.** All participants must take this very seriously – remember, you volunteered to participate knowing these rules.

*I agree with these rules & regulations and fully commit to this program:*

__________________________  _______________________
Participant Signature                   Date
LEARNING GOALS & OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this program is to meet the following specific goals & objectives:

A. Horsemanship Component:
Goals: 1. Students will learn basic horsemanship and riding skills, including the care and management of horses.
2. Students are exposed to non-traditional vocations in the equine industry.

Objectives:
1. Students will be able to perform routine skills involved in the daily care and management of horses such as feeding, cleaning, health care, exercising and grooming.
2. Students will be familiar with basic horse terminology and equipment.
3. Students will be able to lead and control a horse from the ground.
4. Students will be able to saddle and bridle a horse.
5. Students will be able to demonstrate basic riding skills by being able to execute basic patterns in the arena at various gaits.
6. Students will become knowledgeable of various careers in the horse industry such as horseshoer, groomer, veterinary assistant, trainer, breeder, racetrack operator, etc.

B. Life Skills Component:
Goals: 1. To provide an effective, alternative, experiential learning program that engages students physically, mentally and emotionally.
2. To develop and improve life and citizenship skills, work ethic and attitude of students.

Objectives:
1. Students will be able to follow directions and work with others to accomplish a common goal.
2. Students will develop greater awareness of their emotions and non-verbal communication.
3. Students will be able to demonstrate effective communication skills including assertiveness, direction and initiative.
4. Students will learn and master a new skill – horsemanship – which enhances their confidence in new projects and increases self-esteem.
5. Students will learn to respect and trust a big animal and other participants which aids in their development or restoration of trust in others.
6. Students will develop and improve problem-solving skills and creative thinking.
7. Students will demonstrate increased motivation and work ethic.
8. Students will be able to make a connection between what they have learned with the horses to success in the classroom and other areas of their lives (transference of learning to other settings).
TPR Horse Program:
PRE/POST-TEST

Name: ______________________________________ 
Date: ______________________

Part I: Horsemanship
Directions: Please circle T (=True) or F(=False) for the following statements:

1. I know how to feed and take care of a horse T F
2. I know how to groom a horse and pick the hoofs T F
3. I can lead a horse properly and handle it on the ground T F
4. I can saddle and bridle a horse T F
5. I am in control of the speed and direction when riding T F
6. I feel comfortable and safe when riding T F
7. I know and can demonstrate basic riding skills T F
8. I know various career options in the horse industry T F
9. I know how to properly use a rope T F
10. I can rope different targets with 70% accuracy T F

Part II: Personal Skills
The statements below describe how you might think, feel or act. Read each statement carefully and circle what applies for you, do not skip any statements. Please respond truthfully, there are no right or wrong answers.
Directions: Check how often the behavior occurs by circling:
N – Never    S – Sometimes    O – Often    A – Almost Always

11. I set goals for myself
12. I finish what I started
13. I am aware of my emotions/feelings
14. I feel confident trying new things
15. I feel confident about solving problems
16. I give up easily when things get difficult
17. I am motivated to complete new tasks
18. I am proud of my accomplishments
19. I take time to think about my actions
20. I take responsibility for my own words and actions
21. I deal with winning and losing gracefully
22. I make careful choices and decisions
23. I know my strengths and weaknesses
24. I try my hardest in school
25. I want to do better but I can’t
26. I feel “stressed out”
27. I feel I’m in charge of what happens to me
28. I am happy with my efforts in school
29. I ask others if I don’t know how to do something
30. I can see myself being successful
Part III: Interpersonal Skills

Directions: Check how often the behavior occurs by circling:
N – Never  S – Sometimes  O – Often  A – Almost Always

31. I listen well to others  N  S  O  A
32. I follow directions  N  S  O  A
33. I communicate well with others  N  S  O  A
34. I respect others  N  S  O  A
35. I trust others  N  S  O  A
36. I am aware how I come across to other people  N  S  O  A
37. I get along with many other people  N  S  O  A
38. I enjoy working with others  N  S  O  A
39. I help others  N  S  O  A
40. I respect someone else’s feelings  N  S  O  A
41. I accept change well  N  S  O  A
42. I consider myself a leader  N  S  O  A
43. I can express myself appropriately to others  N  S  O  A
44. I accept people who are different from me  N  S  O  A
45. I put myself in someone else’s shoes  N  S  O  A
46. I listen to and consider instructors’ advice  N  S  O  A
47. When I get into trouble, I try to work out a solution  N  S  O  A
48. I have a hard time controlling my anger  N  S  O  A
49. I ask teachers and counselors for help as needed  N  S  O  A
50. I think I am in control of my success  N  S  O  A

Please be sure you have marked all items – thank you!

Part IV: Learning Goals

Think about what you would like to learn in the next few weeks. In the first section, write goals that relate to horsemanship, riding and roping. In the second section, write goals you think would help you in completing the Twin Pines Program and your educational success in school.

A) Horse Program Goals:


A) “Life Skills” & Educational Goals:


151
Writing Prompt: Write about the following in detail:
- Imagine you are writing a letter to a parent or friend about your experiences in the horse program. Besides telling them what you've learned to do, also describe how it made you feel and why, what you enjoyed especially and why, what was hard and why, and how you could learn from these experiences for other areas of your life and the future (for examples, relating to your attitude, actions and goals).
TPR Horse Program:
Creative Writing: Poem

Name: ___________________________ Date: __________________________

Directions: Write a “freestyle” poem or song lyrics below about your horse experiences. Each line should start with the beginning letter for the first word. Lines do not have to rhyme but you can try, it will add a flow to it. Write down what comes to your mind and feel free to be creative and have a little fun with it:

H_________________________________
O_________________________________
R_________________________________
S_________________________________
E_________________________________

P_________________________________
O_________________________________
W_________________________________
E_________________________________
R_________________________________

153
TPR Horse Program: Skills Grade Sheet

Discipline: __HORSEMANSHP__ __RIDING__ __ROPING__ __OTHER__

| Student Name: | | | | Horse Name: |
|--------------|---|---|---|
|              | | | |
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**Grades:** A: Excellent  B: Good  C: Passing  D: Needs Improvement
TPR Horse Program:
Staff Observation Log

Name: ____________________________________ Date: ______________

Your observations and comments are very valuable in evaluating this program. Please complete as detailed as possible:

- What did you notice about the boys' attitudes, actions and behavior in general? How did they respond to the activities? What was different from their "everyday" behavior? What stood out the most? What do you think they are taking away from these experiences? ____________________________________

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- What specific examples are noteworthy (individual cadets or behaviors)? Any general comments/feedback? ____________________________________

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THANK YOU!
Your responses to these questions are very valuable in evaluating this program. Please complete as detailed as possible:

Circle Y (yes) or N (no) for the following statements to measure what you’ve learned:

A. Horsemanship Component:

1. I have learned basic horsemanship and riding skills Y N
2. I have been exposed to careers in the horse industry Y N
3. I can perform routine skills in the daily management of horses, including grooming, feeding, cleaning and exercising Y N
4. I am familiar with basic horse terminology and equipment Y N
5. I can halter, lead and control a horse from the ground Y N
6. I can saddle and bridle a horse Y N
7. I can demonstrate basic riding skills and execute a pattern in the arena at different gaits/speeds Y N
8. I possess basic roping skills Y N

B. Life Skills Component:

1. I have improved how I follow directions and work with others Y N
2. I am more aware of how my attitude and actions affect my success Y N
3. I have improved my communication skills (listening and speaking) Y N
4. I have learned a new skill and have more confidence trying new things Y N
5. I feel better about myself as a result of this program Y N
6. I have learned to respect and trust the horse and instructors Y N
7. I have overcome the fear of not being able to learn to ride Y N
8. I have stuck with every task from beginning to end until completed Y N
9. I have been motivated to participate and complete the activities Y N
10. If one way didn’t work, I looked for different ways to complete a task Y N
11. I can make the connection between what I learned in the horse program to how to succeed in the classroom and other areas of my life Y N
12. I feel more confident in completing my goals Y N
13. I learned about something fun to do in my free time Y N
14. I plan to ride or work with horses again when I get home Y N
15. I learned about myself (strengths, weaknesses, etc.) in this program Y N
16. I learned I can do something if I really want to  
17. I feel good about myself and am proud of completing the program  
18. This program has had an overall positive influence on me  
19. I learned that the harder you work at something, the better you get  
20. I would do this program again if I had the chance

- What have been some of the best experiences of the program, and why?

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________________________________________________________________________

- What have been the hardest parts of the program, and why?

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- What has your “horse partner” taught you?

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________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

- Has the horse program shown you another way of life? Please describe in detail:

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

- What have you learned about yourself? How did you react to new situations?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
What have you accomplished in this program, and how did it make you feel? 

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

How can the experiences from this program help you in your everyday life (such as success in the classroom and life in general)? __________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

What are you taking away from these experiences? ____________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

- Any general comments/feedback? ____________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

THANK YOU!
TPR Horse Program:
Staff Evaluation

Name: ______________________________________  Date: _____________

Your observations and comments are very valuable in evaluating this program. Please complete as detailed as possible:

- Please summarize your observations regarding the participants' progress in the horse program. Include: What did you notice about the boys' attitudes, actions and behavior throughout the program? How did they respond to the activities? Were they successful in completing the specific tasks? What changed or was different in their demeanor or behavior? What stood out the most? Did they learn any "life skills" or lessons in your opinion? Did they seem to enjoy the activities?

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__________________________________________________________________________
What do you think they are taking away from these experiences?

Please add any general comments, observations and feedback:

THANK YOU!
REFERENCES


