

LOCAL

## ‘Equine therapy’ horse ranch in Sky Valley helps people feel grounded

**Ani Gasparyan** Palm Springs Desert Sun

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### Key Points

- Eva Alvarez has been riding horses since she was young and says they helped her through difficult times in her life.
- She knew horses could do the same for others and now runs an "equine therapy" ranch in Sky Valley.

Eva Alvarez sits atop her horse, Goldie, without a saddle. She feels that it’s the best way to connect with the animal, comparing it to how babies are put on their mother’s bare skin when they’re first born.

She leads Goldie around the arena at her ranch, Rancho 3 Agave de Cielo Azul, as the sun in Sky Valley sets. You can hear the horse’s hooves pat against the dirt, roosters crowing incessantly and a chorus of barking dogs. Goldie is a dark brown silhouette against the vibrant blue sky that’s filled with clouds that look like brushstrokes.

This is how Alvarez grounds herself.

“That’s my therapy,” she said. “That becomes my way of coming back to myself, understanding why I’m doing what I’m doing and remembering that having faith is all you really need.”

The 42-year-old equestrian shares this with others who visit her ranch, which hosts "equine-assisted therapy," "equine bonding" and basic horsemanship lessons. Participants get to know Goldie or Alvarez’s other two horses Cheeks and Kabuki by grooming them — tasks like brushing their hair and cleaning their hooves. They also lead the horses by their reigns or ride them through simple obstacles.

She said the horses are the therapists.

“We need to be able to get that moment of letting go of what society wants us to do and be focused on what the animal wants us to do, to be present within ourselves and kind of just let loose,” Alvarez said.

Using animals for therapy is a longstanding form of treatment that has only become more popular throughout the years. Horses are just one of several animals used for this purpose, with dogs, cats and even goats having taken part in this healing process.

Alvarez’s ranch has officially been providing equine therapy for three years [for a sliding scale cost](#). She feels horses can mirror what people feel and help them let go of negative emotions they may not even realize they’re carrying.

“There’s different ways of a holistic approach that we’re giving the community,” she said.

### The journey from escaramuza to equine therapy

Alvarez grew up in Cathedral City and started competing in escaramuza at 9 years old.

The traditional Mexican equestrian sport involves a team of women or girls riding horses in synchronized movements while on a side-saddle. They do so while wearing traditional dresses and sombreros. It’s a part of charrería, a Mexican equestrian sport.

“You know how there’s cheerleaders to the football?” Alvarez said. “We’re the cheerleaders to the rodeo.”

Her mom, Rosa Esparza Torres, used to drive her and her sisters to Thermal in order to compete. They sold all manner of things, including snacks, to raise funds to participate in the sport and buy horses from charros or auctions.

Torres bought the ranch in Sky Valley, east of Desert Hot Springs, in 2004. She grew up in Tequila, Jalisco, around livestock and felt that something was missing when she lived in the city. Goldie, who is in her 20s, originally belonged to her. Her daughter moved in in 2009 and now, she owns the ranch with Torres and Alvarez’s husband — hence the “3” in its name.

But Alvarez eventually lost her love for escaramuza. She competed for about six years but found that for her, it could be a toxic environment despite teaching her leadership and grit. She also didn’t like how horses were treated at the rodeo, feeling they have more of a purpose than sports.

Alvarez said her horse was her counselor when she was younger and her parents separated. She talked to the animal like it was a person, which helped her feel calm and safe, she said.

And years later, horses did the same for her daughter. Her daughter, who was about 8 at the time, went through a difficult time when the COVID-19 pandemic forced schools to transition to virtual learning. Alvarez decided that she’d get her through it by getting her on a horse.

She set up an arena — different than the one that exists at the ranch today, made up of mismatched parts.

“I said, ‘Now you’re the boss. You tell the horse what you need it to do,’” Alvarez said.

Her daughter told her she couldn't do it. She wanted to give up.

"I was like 'Okay so, that's what happens in life when we give up. Nothing.'" Alvarez said. "We get zero results. But once you apply yourself, you'll be able to make the next step over and over."

It worked. She said her daughter conquered riding horses and automatically understood how to work hard. And this drew interest from others who saw this journey documented on Facebook. They messaged Alvarez to ask if they could come over to clean at the ranch since they were stuck social distancing at home.

Rancho 3 Agave's therapy and bonding programs grew into the [nonprofit organization](#) it is now from there. Alvarez has all manner of people come to connect with the horses and heal, in both groups and individually. She described one senior who relates to and dotes on Cheeks, a retired quarter horse in his late teens.

"I love the fact that she just becomes one with the horse, and we forget that we are the ones that have, like, an ache in our back or a bad knee and she's just loving the horse," Alvarez said.

### **'It teaches a lot of patience'**

Abigail Palmerin has been a volunteer with Rancho 3 Agave for about a year. She and her boyfriend Edgar Beltran were at the ranch one afternoon to spend time with Cheeks. After grooming him, Palmerin got on Cheeks bareback while Beltran led them both through obstacles in the arena.

Alvarez is there throughout the process, offering a constant stream of encouragement and guidance. She tells them "Good job! See how he's looking for you to guide him," "You're doing great." and "Relax and breathe — there you go, that's better." She suggests they make kissing noises to help get Cheeks to obey.

It is a learning curve. Cheeks does not always listen to what the couple wants him to do. But that's just part of the process, and Alvarez suggests they work with him — if he doesn't walk one way, then switch to another.

"So sometimes with horses, they'll teach you that just cause one way doesn't work, there's multiple ways to work with them," Alvarez said. "It teaches a lot of patience."

As a volunteer, Palmerin helps Alvarez with her social media accounts in exchange for getting to spend time with her horses and learn horsemanship skills. This kind of exchange is common for the ranch, as Alvarez has people who have attended sessions offer to volunteer their services.

Alvarez said learning horsemanship can't be rushed. There is no firm time limit for these lessons.

"Sometimes, one hour, two hours is not enough. So it goes on to more. So we can't rush the horse to teach you," she said. "It's more like the other way around — we have to give it some time so it can escalate to the next level of patience or just guidance within us."

She picks what horse someone will be paired with based on their needs. Cheeks is her introduction horse since he's the most easygoing. Goldie is for people at an intermediate to advanced level. Kabuki, a 10-year-old stallion whom Alvarez called her "wild child," is the one she reserves for people going through difficult times like PTSD and other traumas.

Alvarez said Kabuki does not have as much exposure to people as her other horses. He is more active and can move unpredictably. He's helped her stay in the present because of this.

"I think that's the beauty about him that, sometimes, I feel like he's the one that rescued me versus me rescuing him because there's moments that I'm always thinking and in my head that he just kind of subtracts that for me," she said.

After concluding their ride, Palmerin and Beltran grab carrots to feed Cheeks and the other horses. Cheeks, in particular, is a fan. He chomps into the vegetable eagerly.

Palmerin found Alvarez through her social media page. She said she hadn't come across a nonprofit organization like Rancho 3 Agave that benefited both the horse and people before.

"I kind of wanted to be part of that and mostly ... just coming here and kind of feeling the atmosphere and their energy, just, it's like therapeutic," Palmerin said.

## **Welcoming**

Leaps Services is a Palm Desert-based program for neurodivergent individuals, like those with autism, ADHD or down syndrome. They've attended Alvarez's ranch as a group several times, even weekly for a few months at the start of the year.

Karina Melgar, Leaps Services' founder, said the group offers neurodivergent people coaching services, social skills programs and community integration. Going to Rancho 3 Agave is one way that it helps them build confidence in themselves.

"For many of them, they've never had an opportunity like this one where it's completely customizable and because Eva is also willing to work with us and try to understand what the needs are, we're able to meet everyone where they're at," she said.

Several members of Leap huddle together at the ranch one morning. Alvarez starts the session by reading the ranch's rules — practical requirements like wear the right footwear and don't come up behind horses to avoid surprising them. They all then walk to the arena, where Cheeks and Goldie wait.

Chairs are set up in the little shade cast by a large storage container, which has a large mural painted depicting Mayahuel — the goddess of maguey, an agave plant. Tequila, where her mom is from, is known for the agave plants that are used to make tequila and also inspired the ranch's name. Alvarez's many farm dogs have also set up camp there, lounging where it's the coolest on the hot day.

Each person has a turn grooming and riding the horses. Alvarez has people helping her so that they can work with both Cheeks and Goldie at the same time. She makes small talk as they go through the motions, like asking them if they have any pets or a favorite dessert

She is once again a steady stream of praise and guidance, saying things like “You’re doing good,” “Now you’re gonna walk around,” “You’re the leader,” and “How do you feel? You want to do it one more time?” Alvarez is patient, never pushing them beyond what they’re comfortable with.

Melgar said there isn't any stress with the experience.

“It’s actually very welcoming. So, the confidence, the empowerment, the communication — those are some of the biggest things,” Melgar said. “Those are things that we work on outside of, you know, being outdoors. And it really goes a long way when we’re able to apply it in real-world opportunities like this one.”

### **‘I know a horse’**

Alvarez said just being outside is a type of therapy. Even the nonstop sounds of livestock in the background, which might annoy some, are soothing to her: All you can hear is the animals and quiet. She's at ease as she sets up a side saddle on Cheeks and mounts him. They move together seamlessly around the arena, the sound of Cheeks' galloping filling the air.

She said some people think you should just get on a horse and figure out how to ride one from there. But Alvarez disagrees, saying you need to understand them from the ground level by grooming and nurturing them. That benefits both the person and animal.

Beside therapy sessions and horsemanship, Rancho 3 Agave has also hosted workshops like bonding sessions for parents and their children. She's also starting a program to help athletes decompress.

Alvarez wants to expand even further, with ideas that include sessions for boys to learn things like how to use a lasso so they can spend less time with electronics. She plans to have therapists hold sessions with their patients at the ranch, with Alvarez standing by to handle the horses.

She said she's had to discover things as she goes with the nonprofit. The paperwork aspect, for instance, required some learning.

“But the animal part was the easiest part. That I felt like I was walking in the park with,” Alvarez said. “That was just like, I know a horse. I know it like if it was a dog.”

*Ani Gasparyan covers the western Coachella Valley cities of Desert Hot Springs and Cathedral City. Reach her at [ani.gasparyan@desertsun.com](mailto:ani.gasparyan@desertsun.com).*