

HOME OF THE STARS

Behind the Barn Door of Starlight Therapeutic Riding Center

“

Nimbus is the most beautiful horse in the world. He's strong, and he's kind, and he has only one eye. But that doesn't matter. He doesn't need two eyes. He's still a good horse.”

— Alea McKeen



WHY HORSES?

FROM SHELLEY DUFFIN

Horses provide vast opportunities for metaphorical learning, a useful technique when working with even the most challenging individuals or groups.

Before a recent lesson, a participant's mother reminded me about her daughter, Alea's aversion for physical differences in herself and others. Interestingly, Alea chose Nimbus, our lesson horse that is missing an eye, as her partner for the day. I vividly remember her reaction when I removed Nimbus's fly mask, and she saw the dark void where his eye had been.

What is wrong with him? He looks so weird," Alea shrieked. I explained that Nimbus had an eye injury, and the vet removed it to alleviate the pain. I assured her that he didn't need two eyes to be a good horse. Alea quietly accepted my explanation, but I recognized she had projected her feelings of perceived inadequacies in her appearance onto the horse.

So why was this lesson important on this day, for this child? Because for children like Alea, Equine Assisted Learning (EAL) can shift their perspective. Unlike other animals, horses have social and responsive behaviors similar to humans. Interaction with the horse creates a space for presence, connection, and transformation. The truth is there are many different ways Alea's underlying concerns could have been addressed. Yet, by connecting with the horse on a physical, emotional, and spiritual level, he mirrored a way for her to let go of self-repugnance and find the beauty in imperfection.

SPOTLIGHT: How Horses Benefit Bodies, Minds, and Spirits

FROM GINGER CAGE

Horses are keen observers – vigilant and sensitive to movement and emotion. They often mirror a participant's behavior or feelings. Although various animals can partner for therapeutic purposes, horses offer unique traits that make them a top choice for animal-assisted therapies. Potential benefits of therapeutic horsemanship include improved:

- **Confidence:** The learning and mastery of a new skill enhances participants' confidence in their ability to tackle new projects, and leads to improved self-esteem.
- **Communication:** Horses' sensitivity to non-verbal communication gives participants a greater awareness of their emotions, the non-verbal cues that they may be communicating, and the important role of non-verbal communication in relationships.
- **Trust:** Learning to trust an animal such as a horse also aides in the development, or restoration, of trust for those whose ability to trust has been violated by difficult life experiences.
- **Impulse Modulation:** Particularly for those whose mental illness involves the experience of lost control over impulses, the need to communicate with a horse calmly and non-reactively promotes the skills of emotional awareness, emotion regulation, and impulse control.
- **Social Skills:** Many individuals with mental illness are socially isolated or withdrawn. A positive relationship with a horse is often a first, safe step toward practicing the social skills needed to initiate closer relationships with people.
- **Creative Freedom:** Often, persons with mental illness have been emotionally inhibited, and have lost some measure of spontaneity. The playful aspects of riding can help restore spontaneity and an ability for healthy recreation and play.
- **Anxiety Reduction:** Numerous studies of human-animal interaction indicate that contact with horses significantly reduces physiological anxiety levels.

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We feel very fortunate that Peyton was able to participate in this program. She absolutely loved it and looked forward to it each week.

– **Mikell Abney**



HORSES

Lead the way.

Horses and humans partnering for emotional wellness.

FROM GINA FRIEDMAN

Talking with a therapist within the confines of an office doesn't always work for children and adults grappling with severe mental, emotional, and behavioral health issues. For some people, adding equine-assisted activities and therapies (EEAT) may be the root of recovery. As an emerging modality, EEAT is generally not the only form of treatment, but rather an augment to traditional talk therapy.

Feeling Anxious?

The demand for EEAT surged when schools closed, and working from home became the norm. Although most adults and children experience some level of anxiety, especially around experiences involving change and uncertainty, there

are times when people experience anxiety that meets clinical guidelines. According to the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH, Intl.), therapeutic riding centers can't meet the requests for services, including EEAT. At last count, there were more than six thousand individuals on PATH, Intl. center waiting lists.

Is It Okay to Say?

Talking about our emotions or engaging in honest conversations with other humans about our mental health isn't always easy, but together, in partnership with the horse, we can help remove the stigma.

Don't Ride? No Problem.

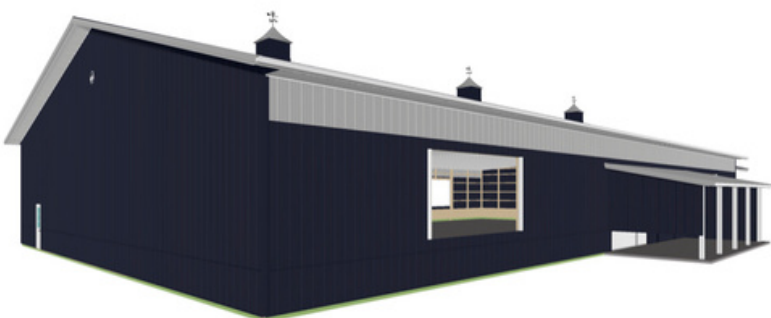
Offering a much different experience than conventional talk therapy, EEAT participants engage in activities with the horse. Riding isn't necessarily involved; instead, the focus is

on presence, attention, mindfulness, boundaries, social cues, etc. Often, participants say spending time with horses feels more natural and non-threatening than traditional talk therapy.

Follow the Herd.

Starlight teaches that horses are not inanimate objects or tools to be used, but willing partners. Our students spend time observing horses in their natural herd environment and interacting with them at liberty so that the horses are free to choose whether or not they want to participate. In this setting, students get immediate feedback on how the horse receives his energy and body language. A dialog begins to take place between horse and human, with the horse drawing the awareness and skills from the human that are needed for a positive relationship to take shape. Over time, the partnership may evolve to include mounted activities, but not always.

BARN BUZZ



Starlight's two-phase construction and renovation plan is designed to meet program growth and enhance client services.

Phase I - \$410,000

- Indoor arena;
- Observation area; and
- Restroom

Phase II - \$150,000

- Renovation of the Holt Barn

Foundations in the Spotlight:

Thank you to **The FMH Foundation**, (\$150,000 grant), **The Scharbauer Foundation**, (\$100,000 challenge grant), and **The J.E. and L.E. Mabee Foundation**, (\$88,000 challenge grant), for generously donating to Starlight's capital campaign.



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Elizabeth Maybin



I have witnessed so many transformations with our riders, not only physically, but emotionally. Horses are truly special beings. They have the capacity to heal in so many ways.

—Elizabeth Maybin

VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

FROM CAREY MUNIZ

Elizabeth Maybin is a busy woman. She is a sustaining member and past-president of the Junior League of Midland, a licensed realtor with Fathom Realty, and she serves as STRC's Gift Officer.

Elizabeth also juggles her two children's schedules, yet she has made volunteering an essential part of her life. She encourages her children to volunteer as much as possible, imbuing them with the same selfless spirit. Thank you for your service and dedication to Starlight!



(L-R) Shelley Duffin, Elizabeth Maybin and daughter, Emma, volunteer to paint fences at STRC.

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