

HOME OF THE STARS

Behind the Barn Door of Starlight Therapeutic Riding Center



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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 McKean

WHY HORSES?

FROM SHELLEY DUFFIN

Ask “why horses?” of anyone with horses, and you're likely to receive a lengthy explanation. In therapeutic horsemanship, horses present a unique opportunity for metaphorical learning. Unlike other animals, horses have social and responsive behaviors similar to humans. Interaction with the horse creates a space for presence, connection, and transformation.

Before a recent lesson, a new student's mother reminded me that her daughter, Alea, disliked her physical differences. This aversion extended to others, including animals. Interestingly, Alea chose Nimbus, our horse without an eye, as her lesson partner.

I vividly remember her reaction when we started grooming, and I removed his fly mask. She saw the dark void where his eye had been, and shrieked, “What's wrong with him? He looks so weird!”

I explained that Nimbus had an injury, and the vet removed his eye to alleviate the pain. I assured her that he didn't need two eyes to be a good horse. To my delight, Alea accepted the explanation and started grooming. Still, I knew she had projected her feelings of perceived inadequacies in her appearance onto the horse. However, as the lesson unfolded, I saw a subtle shift in Alea's demeanor.

Later that week, I received an e-mail from Alea's mother, Carrie McKean. She was eager to tell me about a conversation she'd had with her daughter.

“Today, Alea told me how much she loved ‘her’ horse and how even though he only had one eye, he's really a good horse, and he's not scary or ugly or bad - that was huge because typically, that's not her response,” McKean wrote.

So, *why horses?* In Alea's situation, the physical, mental, and spiritual connection with Nimbus gave her the ability to see beyond the physical differences - his and hers. Ultimately, the dark hole was no longer something to be feared but embraced.

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:

- **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 aids in the development, or restoration, of trust for those whose ability to trust has been violated by difficult life experiences.
- **Anxiety Reduction:** Numerous studies of human-animal interaction indicate that contact with horses significantly reduces physiological anxiety levels.
- **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.

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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.

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 (EAAT) may be the root of recovery. As an emerging modality, EAAT is generally not the only form of treatment, but rather an augment to traditional talk therapy. The demand for EAAT surged when schools closed, and working from home became the norm.

Feeling Anxious?

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 EAAT. At last count, there were more than 6,000 individuals on PATH 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. Offering a much different experience than conventional talk therapy, EAAT participants engage in activities with the horse.

Don't Ride? No Problem.

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.

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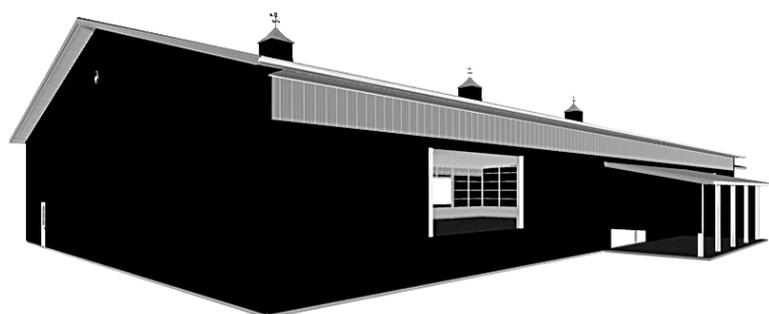
Two feet move our body. Four feet move our soul.

—Unknown

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 engage. 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 is excited to begin a two-phase construction and renovation plan 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

Thank You!

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), have generously donated to Starlight's capital campaign.



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Nimbus and Elizabeth Maybin

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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.