

ANIMAL INSTINCTS



Darvy, a student in Xenophon's therapeutic riding program, bonds with her favorite horse, Ozzie.

Horse Power

At a special equestrian center in the Orinda hills, participants reap life-changing benefits.

BY DEBORAH KIRK

Johnny, a 46-year-old United States Army veteran, needed help clearing his mind of what he called "negative thoughts." He'd been suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after his years of military service, and then the loss of his son to suicide pushed him to the breaking point.

"I had a rough time and was snapping," Johnny explains. "It was hard to get off the couch and be Johnny again."

Horses, the Brentwood resident says, proved to be the answer. Or, more precisely, he discovered equine therapy, in which people with different physical and psychological needs have guided interactions with horses. Many of the benefits of interacting with horses have been known since ancient times, but in recent decades equine-facilitated activities have been used as an aid for an increasing number of conditions.

Introduced to the possibility of engaging with horses by the VA's Martinez Outpatient Clinic, Johnny decided to check out Xenophon, an

accredited therapeutic riding center tucked away in the rolling Orinda hills. "Horses were brand-new to me," says Johnny, a native of Cleveland who moved to California two years ago. "But I remember how Kiwi—the first horse I met at Xenophon—got me out of my head. Horses have an uncanny way of getting you to focus on the now. They let you be honest about caring for something other than yourself."

Johnny is one of many locals who have found that spending time with horses can have healing properties. And just as Johnny's experiences with Kiwi have helped him better cope with his PTSD, others come to Xenophon seeking assistance with conditions such as dementia, autism, muscular dystrophy, and cerebral palsy.

"We have seven amazing therapeutic horses who are dependable, patient, and very astute," explains Jean Johnstone, Xenophon's executive director. "They develop deep relationships with the participants and their caregivers. To our horses, it's irrelevant whether a person uses



a wheelchair or can't speak. These remarkable animals have an extraordinary ability to inspire confidence, pride, and a sense of accomplishment."

Founded in 1993 and in its current location since 1996, Xenophon offers a variety of programs for youth and adults. Young people with physical disabilities can engage in therapeutic riding, where they learn to ride a horse using adaptive equipment. The classes also support social-skill building, as each lesson is a group endeavor: Every horse-and-rider pair is accompanied by four trained individuals (an instructor, handler, and two volunteer side-walkers) to ensure safety. Additionally, young people can benefit from riding with the guidance of a physical or occupational therapist, who uses equine movement as a way of helping riders improve flexibility, posture, and mobility. Johnstone notes that these programs are considered adjunct therapies to complement other forms of treatment that patients receive.

In its earliest days, Xenophon catered exclusively to young people with special needs, giving them opportunities to ride horses under close supervision. But over the past five or so years, Xenophon has expanded to fund programs for adults with various conditions. Unlike the youth programs, these interactions are "unmounted," because the adults come to Xenophon simply to be with horses—grooming them, leading them, or even just being in their presence.

One of the most successful adult offerings is Operation Hooves on the Ground, a program for military veterans that Xenophon launched in 2016. Since Johnny started attending, he has become something of an ambassador for the program, encouraging other vets to try it. As he and many others have found, the relationship with a horse can be unlike that with other animals, even a beloved pet.

"Horses must give you permission to take control," Johnny says. "So the interaction

requires mutual respect and trust. I've been able to take the things I've learned from horses and apply them to the rest of my life."

Rich and Gloria, a married couple from Pleasant Hill, are also big fans of Xenophon, but for different reasons. A retired manager for PG&E, Rich was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease about eight years ago. When Gloria learned that Xenophon had developed a program for people with early-stage dementia and their caregivers, she eagerly signed up.

"I needed help with the day-to-day issues of Rich's Alzheimer's," she says. "We attend support groups, which are very helpful, but I wanted to find something that would be really uplifting for him. And that's what happens every time he's with the horses at Xenophon. He just feels happier, and I do, too."

Called the Connected Horse Project, Xenophon's program for dementia patients is focused on gentle interactions, such as grooming a horse or leading it around a ring. "We've seen significant benefits when patients engage like this," Johnstone says. "We see a lot of stress reduction and improved multisensory awareness. But the word that comes up most often is joy."

Gloria agrees. "What happens with the horses is magical," she says. "Both Rich and I feel loved and connected. We always have a smile on our faces when we leave." ■



From top: Xenophon's adult programs allow humans and horses to share a social experience; grooming teaches life skills and breeds self-esteem; young riders get trophies to celebrate their achievements.



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