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EQUINE SPIRIT SANCTUARY

Taos equine sanctuary builds program where horses help people heal



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Courtesy photo

Licensed clinical counselor Jon Katz visits with Cisco at the Equine Spirit Sanctuary in Taos. Katz will be working with the equine-assisted activities and therapy program at the sanctuary where horses help people suffering from a variety of conditions. His specialties include depression, anxiety, trauma and PTSD and issues including Asperger's syndrome, autism, grief, relationship issues, self-esteem and sexual abuse.

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By Ruth Bourgeois For The Taos News

We have been working hard to build our Equine-Assisted Activities and Therapies program at Equine Spirit Sanctuary for many years and 2019 is going to be a big year for our efforts.

We have actively done therapeutic riding and equine-assisted activities at the sanctuary since 2008. ESS is also a licensed horse rescue and almost all of the horses, donkeys and miniature horses were either unwanted or rescued animals. Many of these are now program horses. We have seen the power of turning hurt to healing, and what these animals can give back to humans - even those equines that have every reason not to trust or want to interact with humans.

ESS has operated on a shoestring budget for years, and while we are proud of the success of our programs, it has been frustrating not to be able to do more. One of our goals has always been to have a serious EAAT program. This year we will be offering a full equine-assisted therapy program with a licensed clinical counselor, Dr. Jon Katz. His specialties include depression, anxiety, trauma and PTSD and issues including Asperger's syndrome, autism, grief, relationship issues, self-esteem and sexual abuse. He works from a trauma-informed approach addressing mind/body/spirit and emotion.

Our goal is to offer a unique program that has the potential to make a powerful, positive impact on lives, taking traditional counseling out of the office into a place of safety and into nature to provide a different way of addressing a problem or an issue. Interacting with horses opens up opportunities for healing emotional processes. As in traditional therapy, the licensed therapist uses his or her training in counseling methodology to provide treatment specifically for the client's needs. Valuable life skills can be learned through working with and interacting with horses. Participants learn safe horse handling with grooming and leading exercises. Riding may also be included if appropriate, but the focus is more on personal growth and life skills. Activities are designed to improve self-esteem and self-awareness, combining body awareness exercises with motor planning and verbal communication, in a safe and supportive setting.

At-risk individuals may not trust therapists or teachers, or even adults in general. Taking the therapy session outdoors, to activities with horses, is a bit more like recreational or play and adventure therapy, rather than traditional therapy, and potentially more effective with persons who have suffered trauma or who have trust issues. The experiential nature of the equine therapy sessions offers therapeutic opportunities with every interaction between the horse and the client. While the focus is on traditional counseling, the horses provide immediate feedback and are amazing emotional mirrors. The client does various activities with the horse, designed to provide opportunities for growth, self-reflection, confidence building, body awareness, relationships and, especially, to learn to be centered and grounded.

To further support the program we have a Masterson Method® equine bodywork clinic scheduled for June 14-16. This clinic is specifically designed for professionals working in the field of equine-assisted activities and therapies and approved by Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship, International (PATH, Intl.). We also will be able to offer internships to college psychology majors and have a student from Southwest College in Santa Fe who will be doing an internship with us beginning in April. Private sessions are one to one and a half hours in length, once per week, at a cost of \$100 to \$150 per session (depending upon length of the session). We have applied for various grants and are seeking funding to cover program costs so that we

can offer this to persons (on a sliding scale basis) who may not be able to afford it otherwise.

We will also offer group sessions and activities. These are tailored towards a specific theme and may also include art therapy and yoga as well. For more information, please come out and visit ESS on one of our open days (Tuesday, Wednesday and Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.). We welcome visitors and will be happy to talk to you more about our program.

Ruth Bourgeois is founder and executive director of the nonprofit Equine Spirit Sanctuary in Taos. Find out more at EquineSpiritSanctuary.org (<https://www.equinespiritsanctuary.org/>).