

Help horses help people

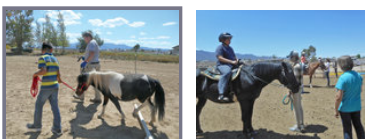
Equine therapy program seeks volunteers for summer programs



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Courtesy photo

Volunteers work with one of the ponies at the Equine Spirit Sanctuary in Taos.



**By Ruth Bourgeois, executive director
Equine Spirit Sanctuary**

Summer is coming soon and we are now preparing for the busiest time of the year here at Equine Spirit Sanctuary. If you would like to make a difference in the life of a rescued horse, or a child or even yourself, check out the volunteer opportunities at ESS.

Volunteer training will be held every Wednesday afternoon in May, beginning at 1 p.m. These training sessions are to prepare volunteers for assisting with the therapeutic riding program, but are also appropriate for anyone interested in helping out even if it's not with the riding lessons. We handle and work with the horses the same regardless of whether they are a program horse or not. But because many of our horses are members of our equine-assisted activities and therapies (EAAT) team, we strive to be consistent with everything we do with every horse.

I often get asked what the difference is between working with a therapy program horse and any other horse. To me, there is no difference. Our handling methods are based on natural horsemanship techniques that encourage the horse to be in control of himself and to be responsive to the handler's body language, energy and voice commands, rather than us trying to control the horse with force or dominance. We want our horses to trust us totally, and it is especially rewarding when a rescue horse that has been abused or treated harshly gains confidence and trust in people again, and becomes a safe, willing partner for our programs for people with disabilities or severe life challenges like PTSD.

Volunteers are taught basic safety guidelines for working with horses - working in pairs as we prepare the horses for the riding lessons. A therapeutic lesson horse needs to be comfortable with a lot of people around her - a horse leader, one or two sidewalkers, the rider and the instructor. And the horse also needs to be unflappable when the riders play games of catch with small balls or stuffed toys. It takes a bit more time and practice to get the horses comfortable with all these things, but most have no problem with it after they have figured out their important role as a lesson horse and have learned to take their cue for the activities from the volunteers who assist with the lessons.

Our therapeutic riding horses typically start out in our unmounted EAAT program, which is geared more toward emotional and mental health conditions resulting from trauma, grief, addictions or other stresses. Most of these sessions are doing grooming and leading exercises, as a part of learning and therapy activities.

Our horses range in age from 2 1/2 years old to the mid-30s, and sizes everywhere from our miniature donkeys and horses to our giant Hanovarian, who is 17.2 hands tall. But every horse is handled with the same methods. Consistency in the handling of the horses is what makes our program horses safe for participants of all ages and abilities.

A typical volunteer day at ESS begins at 9 a.m. in the summer months. Volunteers assist with the cleaning of the barn, stalls and turnouts. Therapeutic riding lessons are scheduled in the mornings on Tuesday and Wednesday, so while some volunteers are cleaning, others are assisting with lessons. We usually take turns with each activity.

Volunteers are also needed to assist with maintenance and special projects, such as fencing, painting, gardening and general property cleanup. There is always work to do - cleaning tack, cleaning the classroom, grooming the horses that are not being used for the programs, cleaning and filling water tanks, doing office work and sometimes greeting visitors and telling them about ESS. We also need extra help for our Spring Open House, which will be Saturday, May 25.

There are many perks to volunteering at ESS. I like to compare it to having children. I don't have children, but people bring their kids out and I get to enjoy working with them and doing fun stuff, without any of the responsibility that goes with being a parent. Here, people can enjoy the horses without the 24/7 responsibility that goes with owning a horse. Another perk is that you don't have to go to a gym and pay a membership fee to get lots of great exercise and work on fitness. And even better than going to a gym, you also get unlimited fresh air and sunshine! But I feel that best thing that volunteers get out of the time they give in service at ESS is that they are member of a team that makes horses' lives better, makes children's lives better,

while experiencing the amazing impact that these horses have on people.

If you are interested in volunteering at ESS, please join us Wednesdays in May or come out on an open day and check it out. Equine Spirit Sanctuary is open Tuesday, Wednesday and Saturday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. There is also information on our programs and volunteering on our web site at [equinespiritsanctuary.org](https://www.equinespiritsanctuary.org) (<https://www.equinespiritsanctuary.org/>).

Ruth Bourgeois is executive director of Equine Spirit Sanctuary.