

Horses helping kids and big people, too

By Ruth Bourgeois

As we begin our summer schedule of lessons and activities, often people ask what the difference is between our regular riding program, therapeutic riding lessons and equine-assisted therapy.

In many ways, each of these activities is one in the same. The hands-on work with the horses, from learning to be safe when working with horses, to leading and riding, is basically the same with all of our programs.

Whether we are working with a child or adult that is physically or mentally challenged (and who of us is not – to some degree), as an instructor I strive to teach the student or client to learn to the best of their ability, not disability.

Our programs are based on gentle, respectful horsemanship methods. We promote the relationship with the horse.

Our horses are never considered "tools" for therapy or learning or just plain fun. They are our partners in building skills, confidence, awareness and so much, much more.

All the programs begin with a basis of teaching people to be present. This includes yoga- and Tai Chi-type breathing and centering exercises, all within the horse's presence and space, learning to read the horse's body language and getting a sense of connection with the animal.

Participants learn that everything we do with horses is an exchange of energy. How we present ourselves to the horse affects how the horse responds to us, and this applies to our daily lives and relationships as well.

Groundwork (grooming and leading exercises) are typically the foundation of equine-assisted therapy programs. Our program incorporates riding also if it is appropriate for the client.

Riding lessons begin with a continuation of the breathing and centering exercises, on the horse instead of on the ground. Riding skills are taught with an emphasis on balanced, centered riding rather than a specific discipline such as western, English

or dressage.

When a person has balance and core strength, an understanding of how a horse moves and how to move with that horse, it doesn't really matter what saddle they use as long as it has a comfortable fit for both horse and rider. It's not about the equipment used. It's about communicating with the horse using balance, energy, intention and correct use of body mechanics.

This applies to anyone who rides a horse. It works and it is

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We watched a young rider with Down syndrome at his therapeutic lesson riding solo last summer, with just a halter and lead rope to guide his horse, riding on a bareback pad with no stirrups. He asked the horse to trot, then said, "Go faster!" The horse picked up a beautiful, smooth, easy canter. When he reached the spot where I had asked him to stop, the horse came to a perfect halt when the little boy said, "Whoa." It was amazing to see that wonderful connection between this rider and his horse.

The ESS programs are under the direction of

Ruth Bourgeois, a PATH International-accredited therapeutic riding instructor and are open to persons of all ages and abilities. The main difference between a therapeutic riding lesson and a regular riding lesson is simply that for a therapeutic riding lesson, the rider has a diagnosis from his or her physician that defines a condition that the person is being treated for or that may limit or affect their physical condition. We work within guidelines as is safe and appropriate.

The difference between equine-assisted activities and equine-assisted therapy is that it can only be considered as therapy when a licensed counselor or therapist is present at the session and actively engaged in the activity. The actual activities that we do are the same.

The beauty and benefit of having a therapist present is that after the session is over, the therapist can follow up with the client in discussing the issues that the horse has introduced. It takes the therapy session out of the traditional office and into a setting that has the unique advantage of bringing together elements of fresh air, the outdoors, horses, new friends and new activities while addressing core issues, such as self-esteem, confidence, fear, anger and other emotions or issues that may be painful in a person's life.

Horses, in their majestic, nonjudgmental manner, can bring out the best in people. They truly become our teachers.

Anyone interested in learning more about these unique programs is encouraged to talk to Ruth about participation and mentoring opportunities. ESS is open for visitors Tuesday, Wednesday and Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Volunteers are always needed and appreciated on these days. For more information, call Ruth at Equine Spirit Sanctuary (575) 758-1212, or go to equinespiritsanctuary.org or [facebook.com/equine-spiritsanctuary](https://www.facebook.com/equine-spiritsanctuary).

Ruth Bourgeois is executive director of Equine Spirit Sanctuary in Taos.



Courtesy photo

Danny rides Elvis at the Equine Spirit Sanctuary in Taos in June 2018 during a therapy session.

Correction - this photo of Danny was from a lesson in 2017.



Courtesy photo

Jazzy and Bindy enjoy the shade at the Equine Spirit Sanctuary in Taos.