

# EQUINE ASSISTED LEARNING FOR SPECIAL POPULATIONS

By

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## ABSTRACT

### EQUINE ASSISTED LEARNING FOR SPECIAL POPULATIONS

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This paper explores the use of equine-assisted learning (EAL) activities with special populations and includes a program evaluation for two equine-assisted learning programs developed and conducted by HeartStrides, a non-profit organization in the Pacific Northwest. The study included two populations (N=18); the at-risk youth program included seven participants and the veterans' clinic included eleven participants. For the purpose of this study, the participating youth are considered "at-risk" due to their risk factors that include socioeconomic status, exposure to stressful and traumatic events (physical, sexual, and/or psychological abuse), neglect, dysfunctional parenting, substance abuse in the home, self-harming tendencies and/or suicidal thoughts or actions. I conducted quantitative analysis on the pre- and post-survey results for both groups, and qualitative analysis on the veterans' group survey. The results indicated the EAL activities had a positive impact on the at-risk youths' resilience, hope, agency and pathways to higher thinking scores. The results showed a positive impact on the veterans' ability to cope with stress after the completion of the clinic. The results indicate implementation of these activities may have a positive impact on participants' stress and coping skills. Findings from the analyses suggest these programs at HeartStrides are

having the desired effect on participants. Based on the results of this study, and a growing body of literature on the impacts of equine-based programming on various populations, I propose utilizing EAL activities with the formerly incarcerated population in hopes of achieving similar results. Overall, this study adds to research about equine-assisted programs, such as those offered through HeartStrides and other potentially effective EAL programs for an array of special populations.

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## CHAPTER 1: PROJECT OVERVIEW AND LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Program Evaluation*

This project is a program evaluation of two programs offered through HeartStrides Therapeutic Riding and Horsemanship in Olympia, Washington during 2016. As part of the fulfillment for my master's degree, I completed a placement at HeartStrides working as an intern for this non-profit organization and saw the need to do a program evaluation using existing data the organization had collected during two pilot programs. I chose to write a non-traditional program evaluation of the two programs—Hope with Horses and Operation T.H.R.I.V.E.—so I could fulfill the requirements of my degree, connect the work the organization does with the skills and knowledge I have, and use the evaluation to assist with further developing these programs in the coming years.

Once I was interning at HeartStrides, I saw the potential for program evaluations utilizing the data they had previously collected from surveys given during the program implementation. The organization knew that collecting the data would be valuable to them long-term in an effort to acquire grant funding, but had no ability or time to analyze or make sense of the data. As a way to incorporate my learning experiences as an intern at a non-profit and my knowledge obtained as a graduate student, I decided the best way to move forward was to use the program evaluations as my master's project. I was given permission to analyze their aggregate survey data to provide them with feedback that will be used to make changes to the curriculum. I am invested in this organization and the

evaluations will be used by myself and the organization to make changes and inform the development of equine-assisted learning programs at the ranch in the future.

In an effort to understand the effects of equine-assisted learning activities on self-esteem and resiliency, HeartStrides staff conducted survey research on participants in two of their equine-assisted learning programs: Hope with Horses and Operation T.H.R.I.V.E. These two programs catered to preteen and teen girls from local junior high and high schools, and to veterans and activity duty military personnel, respectively. By conducting this research, the organization hoped to understand the effects of equine-assisted learning activities for these two populations. The two programs are currently in the beginning stages and HeartStrides had already gathered survey data from the pilot programs.

This project specifically focuses on evaluating the implementation of equine-assisted learning activities with special populations including at-risk youth, veterans and active duty military personnel. The goals of this project are to discuss the program development and implementation of equine-assisted learning activities for two programs at a non-profit organization—one for at-risk youth and one for veterans and active duty military personnel—and to propose a program for the future with similar curriculum for the formerly incarcerated population.

This project begins with an introduction to equine-assisted learning and how it is applicable to a variety of populations. Chapter two provides the history, mission and vision, organization structure, goals and values, and challenges of my placement site, HeartStrides Therapeutic Riding and Horsemanship of Olympia. Chapter three looks at the development of the Hope with Horses program, the curriculum, facilitation, and the

analysis of the survey data. Chapter four looks at the development of Operation T.H.R.I.V.E. Warrior Horsemanship clinic, the curriculum, facilitation and an analysis of the survey data. After examining the existing data for these two programs with different populations of clients, chapter five introduces the issues surrounding prisoner reentry and the potential for using equine-assisted learning activities on those returning to their community after periods of incarceration. Chapter six summarizes my placement at HeartStrides and offers a discussion of possible next steps for the organization.

### *Equine-Assisted Learning*

Equine-Assisted Therapy is a relatively new phenomenon that continues to be developed and further investigated. In the past, most equine based therapy was used to treat children and adults with disabilities, but new techniques and exercises have demonstrated effectiveness for treating mental health issues in other populations. Equine-assisted learning is an experienced-based learning approach designed to encourage the development of life skills. This approach partners humans with horses in guided lesson plans which can include activities that encourage trust, respect, honesty and communication. Many interactions with horses also lead participants to learn a heightened level of self-awareness and gain self-confidence and self-esteem (EAGALA 2010; OK Corral Series 2017; PATH International 2017). Equine-assisted learning activities are proving to be a great alternative therapy for a variety of populations, including at-risk youth and veterans (EAGALA 2010; OK Corral Series 2017). It may be

that while these lessons are focused on relationships with horses, they can be lessons for interacting with humans, too. These lessons offer an opportunity to build relationships and trust for those who have experienced trauma or have other barriers relating to humans. These lessons can be a first step to re-establishing healthy relationships with peers, partners, friends and family members.

#### *Equine-assisted learning with at-risk adolescents*

While research into the effectiveness of equine-assisted learning and therapy is rather new, there have been previous studies done with at-risk adolescents that show positive outcomes. When studying at at-risk youth specifically, much of the literature focuses on depression, hope, and general positive changes in behavior. Other studies more specifically explore the effects on adolescents with substance abuse issues, eating disorders, depression, anxiety, or severe mental health issues.

One Texas study specifically looked at non-riding equine-assisted learning activities and the impacts they had on at-risk youth. For the purpose of this study, “at-risk” is used to describe middle and high school students who have low achievement, behavior problems, poor attendance, and low socioeconomic status. The authors found a significant inverse relationship with hope and depression; as hope increased, depression decreased. The treatment group of youth were given a five-week EAL course. In that period of time, they found that the equine-assisted learning activities significantly increased the participants’ levels of hope and decreased levels of reported depression. These authors acknowledge outcomes can vary based on the individual characteristics,

but suggest that the use of EAL can move some youth to respond positively to horses and therefore may help them move toward positive outcomes (Frederik, Hatz and Lanning 2015).

Another study done with adolescents in a rural setting also found similar findings. Burgon (2011) explored the experiences of at-risk youth who participated in a therapeutic horsemanship program. For this study, Burgon (2011) identified the participating youth as “at-risk” due to their risk factors that included socioeconomic status, environmental risk factors, exposure to stressful and traumatic events (physical, sexual or psychological abuse), neglect, dysfunctional parenting, and parental or guardian drug/alcohol abuse. Burgon (2011) concluded that the participants gained psychosocial benefits such as the ability to reflect, social competence, empathy and a sense of purpose for the future. She found that the youth expressed higher levels of empathy, confidence and self-esteem, and a sense of mastery and self-efficacy after completing their program.

In another study, Burgon (2014) also found that equine-assisted learning activities helped at-risk adolescents develop healthy attachments, empathy and trust through the relationships they formed with horses. As Burgon (2014) theorized, the bonds the teenage participants formed with horses gave them an example of a healthy attachment and allowed them to begin to understand how those bonds could pertain to human relationships.

Lombardo (2016) also discussed the effects of equine-assisted learning on at-risk adolescents. She discussed the changes in the patients at the Elk River Treatment Center who were involved in equine-assisted learning activities to combat an array of issues

including depression, eating disorders, PTSD, substance abuse and self-harm/cutting. Lombardo (2016) theorized this type of therapy may be effective because it allows the adolescents to learn at their own pace and on their own terms. These experiences allowed the teens to have a choice in where the lesson will take them, in terms of learning or development, as there is no preconceived end goal. Working with an equine partner helps the participants to develop leadership and teamwork skills, as the program grew their confidence, and encouraged healthy attitudes.

Generally, animal therapy, and in particular, equine-assisted learning, has been found to increase resilience, self-confidence and self-awareness in participants (Burgon 2014; EAGALA 2010; Kruger and Serpell 2006). These studies reveal a great deal of information that shows the effectiveness of utilizing equine therapy with at-risk youth to help them develop the skills needed to succeed and thrive. It is important to continue to develop studies similar to these to expand on the knowledge of equine-assisted therapies and how such programs can help a variety of populations overcome trauma and form healthy and meaningful relationships. One program in the Pacific Northwest, HeartStrides, uses their Hope with Horses program to study on effects of equine-assisted learning activities on rates of resilience of at-risk teen girls in a rural community.

Many of these studies focus on solely the cognitive and emotional effects of equine-assisted learning activities on youth. The studies mentioned focus on both male and female adolescents, but do not discuss any similarities or differences in the effects of this type of therapy based on gender of the participants. There is currently a lack of comparison studies across genders, and longitudinal studies of the benefits of these



programs through adulthood. In the current study, HeartStrides' program is aimed to help teen girls overcome self-harming and/or suicidal tendencies while also helping boost self-esteem and self-confidence. While it may have not been intentional, the group of girls in the pilot program also included those who had histories of trauma or abuse, problems with intimate relationships, etc. It may be beneficial to continue to study this population and the long-term effects of EAL on the wide array of issues adolescent girls face in that rural community to continue to add to the knowledge on the subject.

#### *Equine-assisted learning with veterans and active duty military personnel*

Since the early 2000s, various organizations began joining forces with our nation's military personnel to offer equine-assisted therapy to our service men and women coming back from war with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBI). PTSD and TBI are both extremely harmful conditions that affect many soldiers on some level returning from war (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs 2015). The nation still has veterans from World War II and the Vietnam War who are dealing with these conditions as well, and did not receive any form of treatment once they returned home (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs 2015). As war continues throughout the world, hundreds of thousands of soldiers return to the United States attempting to settle back into the civilian lifestyle they once knew (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs 2015). These soldiers will need support to deal with the physical and emotional tolls of participating in combat.

With the help of organizations such as National American Riding Handicapped Association and PATH International, more soldiers are able to overcome effects associated with the conditions of PTSD and TBI. Local equestrian facilities that specialize in equine therapy and psychotherapy have teamed up with military medical facilities to match veterans to therapy programs that best fit their needs. In some instances, they will meet a few times per week for a 9 to 12-week period. During this time a soldier will be matched with a horse, will learn the basics of horse care (grooming, feeding, feet upkeep, etc.) and will begin training the horse using natural horsemanship training methods. The sessions can vary from ground work, mounted (in the saddle) work, and driving (carts and buggies pulled by horses) work. At the end of the equine portion of the meeting, the soldiers all get together with a psychologist and a recreational therapist to discuss their goals of connecting and communicating as well as any problems or concerns they are having. Often times, private conversations are provided if a soldier requests one (PATH Intl 2017).

So far, there have been various studies on different aspects of this type of therapy and whether or not it is working. There has been research done pertaining to equine therapy being used to treat cognitive and physical conditions such as amputations and prosthetics or speech impairments. However, there has not been much research into the aspects of equine therapy that examine the effect on feelings and emotional issues.

MacLean (2011) and Hinojosa and Hinojosa (2011) found equine-assisted therapy helped their veteran participants reintegrate into civilian life. MacLean (2011) theorized because horses are naturally hypervigilant, veterans can understand and connect with

them, as they too have had to be extremely aware and cautious as a means to stay alive during combat. Animals and humans in general often create extremely strong bonds toward one another, but in the instance of a war veteran suffering from a variety of conditions, horses seem to help. Hinojosa and Hinojosa (2011) reported veterans often come back from war untrusting and frustrated with their lack of ability to communicate with humans as they did before getting deployed; when they feel as if they cannot accurately convey their feelings and emotions, the authors theorized horses became a vital role in “saving” them from themselves (Hinojosa and Hinojosa 2011).

In addition to emotional support, Benda (2005) has studied the healing effects of equine-assisted therapy in regards to the ability to physically assist military personnel. He stated while it is difficult to do a study on the effects of equine-assisted therapy on PTSD and TBI, it is easier to measure the physical effects of the therapy. As Benda (2005) reported, the walking gait of a horse is very similar to the motion that humans make when they are walking. For the veterans who come back and need prosthetics, there is a benefit to working with horses. When these participants are enrolled in equine-assisted therapy programs they are able to get the feeling of walking as they did before their injury.

Additionally, in order to be reintegrated back into society successfully, it is beneficial for these veterans to feel like they belong in the society. When they gain back the motions of performing the simple—and often taken for granted—task of walking, they get a sense of normalcy in their lives. While it may be difficult to study the cognitive and emotional aspects of these soldiers and veterans, Benda (2005) proposed more

research can be done in order to study the physical assistance that it provides to show that it is indeed helping these military personnel.

Palaestra (2007, 2008a, 2008b) had a slightly different view on equine-therapy. While they appeared to agree that equine-assisted therapy did indeed help veterans recover from PTSD and other various complications that result from war, they focused more on combining various activities with equine-therapy so veterans are given programs for more well-rounded reintegration into society. It was clearly noted that different recreational activities such as white-water rafting, hot-air balloon riding, hiking, etc. can be used together to offer more variety in the rehabilitation process. Art therapy and writing were also used as a means to connect clients to the community they were returning to. Palaestra (2007, 2008b) believed the goal was self-improvement, social interaction, increased awareness and education. In order for each individual in the program to meet those goals, Palaestra (2008a, 2008b) argued adamantly for the use of other forms of activities in addition to the equine-assisted therapy. This particular approach falls more in line with the approach that HeartStrides Therapeutic Riding and Horsemanship of Olympia takes with their clients. HeartStrides emphasizes the need for a more complete and comprehensive approach that utilizes the equine-assisted learning activities, but also allows for time to connect with a mental health counselor, work in teams to accomplish tasks, and take time to self-reflect.

The research on using equine-assisted programs with military veterans provides similar findings, which may be a limitation. It appears most of the articles that can be found from various reputable sources reflect the views of the instructors themselves with

a few testimonials from actual veterans in the program. Many studies focus on the physical aspects of equine-therapy, but do not include the effect it can have on cognitive thinking. Another limitation is not having sufficient evidence of the differences in how men and women react to the use of equine-assisted therapy to treat their conditions.

A portion of this project focuses on evaluating the use of equine-assisted learning on the effects of managing or coping with stress and anxiety in the Operation T.H.R.I.V.E. clinic. This research does not fill all gaps in knowledge, but it does contribute to the research regarding the effects of equine-assisted learning activities on cognitive learning, relating to others, managing emotions, and stress management for veterans and military personnel.

## CHAPTER 2: HEARTSTRIDES

This chapter introduces the non-profit, HeartStrides Therapeutic Riding and Horsemanship of Olympia, that was the site of my learning placement for partial fulfillment of my MA project requirements. The chapter includes an overview of its history, mission and vision, the structure of the organization, the organization's values, and their challenges and fundraising methods. To conclude, I introduce the two newest programs that HeartStrides started in 2016, of which I was fortunate to be a part.

### *History*

HeartStrides Therapeutic Riding and Horsemanship of Olympia was founded in 2010 by Kristy Dees and her husband, Jim Telloian. Their daughter, Magn, was born in 1997 and diagnosed with Down Syndrome. Kristy and Jim quickly found that Magn's life was dramatically transformed by therapeutic riding, and they envisioned building a program that would further enhance the lives of others in their community. After many years of hard work and planning, the family bought a ranch in Tumwater, WA towards the end of 2008. By the beginning of 2009, their ranch was established as Healing Hearts Ranch and Dees began to consider introducing a nonprofit into the mix that was dedicated to serving the Olympia, Tumwater and Lacey communities. In 2010, her dream became a reality as Healing Hearts Ranch became home to HeartStrides Therapeutic Riding and Horsemanship of Olympia, a 501c3 non-profit organization. While

HeartStrides was originally formed to help children and adults with disabilities, Kristy soon found an interest in using horses as therapy for other social problems. By 2015, Kristy realized that there were other groups of people that would benefit from therapeutic horseback riding and equine-assisted learning activities. In 2016, HeartStrides began offering programs for veterans and active duty military personnel, victims of sexual assault or other traumatic experiences, teens suffering from suicidal thoughts or tendencies and self-harm, victims of violent crimes, and adults suffering from addiction. The programs have expanded rapidly in the past year and while that has led to additional challenges, it has also opened the doors to services these communities have never seen before. HeartStrides' mission is to integrate the principles of horsemanship and research-based learning during interactive experiences with horses, which will improve the well-being of individuals, families and communities. Their vision is to partner people with horses for transformative experiences that strengthen, develop and improve lives.

### *Organizational Structure*

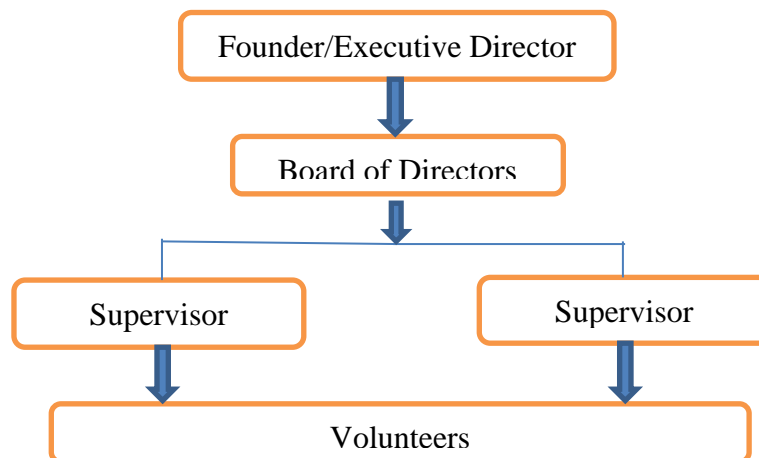
HeartStrides is set up like many other 501c3 nonprofits, but is housed at Healing Hearts Ranch. HeartStrides is the nonprofit organization and Healing Hearts Ranch is the for-profit business. Kristy Dees is the Founder/Executive Director and works closely with her current Board of Directors which consists of five members that were confirmed in March 2017. The board members include Dees's husband, a local high school athletics coach, and three additional community members/volunteers. They were chosen to be

board members because of their relationship with Dees and their support of her mission, vision, goals and core values. Two of the board members have extensive knowledge of Dees's herd, how the ranch runs and how to safely handle and interact with the horses for both riding and therapy. The athletics coach comes with years of experience with team building, mentoring youth and has valuable connections to other stakeholders in the community. Dees's husband offers a great amount of support and is always working hard to help in any way he can. These people are more than board members for Dees, they are very close friends, valuable community members and hardworking volunteers.

While Dees sits at the top of the HeartStrides organization structure, followed by the Board of Directors, underneath the board members are two supervisors who are permanently employed staff. The supervisors are Dees's assistants and take direction from the top down. Under the supervisors are the other volunteers who are organized based on their experience with horses and the length of time they have been working at the ranch.



Figure 1. HeartStrides Organizational Structure



Most of the decisions are made by Dees because of her extensive knowledge of horses and therapeutic riding and her background in addiction and peer-to-peer counseling. However, some of the financial decisions, changes to the mission, values and vision are run through the Board of Directors. HeartStrides has monthly board meetings where they all gather to discuss upcoming events, finances, needs of the organization and volunteer management. The board members are mostly in place to assist with writing the bylaws and keep the nonprofit up and running from the legal side. Most of the decision making occurs on the ground in the day to day activities. Dees is the owner of the property and makes decisions based on the needs of the horses, barn maintenance, etc. She dictates how many clients she has and what activities will be included. The new Board of Directors is planning to be more hands-on with fundraising, volunteer recruitment and networking. While there is a hierarchical structure, Dees ensures

everyone's voice is heard and makes decisions based on safety first. There are frequent group meetings with staff and board members to all get together to voice concerns, brainstorm ideas and engage in conversations with one another so everyone remains in the loop regarding what is happening with the nonprofit.

### *Goals*

HeartStrides' main goals are to rid the negative stigmas surrounding mental health, assist a variety of individuals in healing from their past traumas and create a safe space in the community where people know they are welcome and encouraged to work on themselves. The team at HeartStrides is dedicated to helping others develop positive coping mechanisms, raise their self-esteem, and learn to recognize and control their emotions.

HeartStrides is set up to offer counseling, therapeutic riding and equine-assisted learning activities, and they also connect clients to other services in the community (to include legal assistance, housing, food or clothing help, education, etc.) and actively work to spread the word about addiction, trauma and mental health. HeartStrides staff and volunteers put on workshops about stigma, mental health issues, trauma and addiction that include movie screenings, clinics, and trainings on recognizing signs of trauma and abuse and on strengthening relationships with others. HeartStrides also offers horsemanship and equine-assisted learning activity workshops to organizations and

businesses in the community to demonstrate what they do and why it works in an effort to spread HeartStrides mission and gain more support for their programs.

Kristy Dees and the other staff and volunteers stay up-to-date on the current literature surrounding mental health, trauma and addiction. They attend workshops put on by other organizations to connect and learn about their struggles and how the problems they see are intertwined and connected. The workshops and meetings with other organizations are the primary way Dees is able to spread the word about the work HeartStrides is doing and to mobilize with others who are interested in these same issues. By connecting with other organizations, HeartStrides has created a wider network across Washington state that has allowed not only itself to grow, but other nonprofit organizations as well. The staff and volunteers at HeartStrides also attend events where they can table with their information and show videos of their work in action. Many of them also participate in the various events put on in Olympia, Lacey, and Tumwater surrounding the issues of addiction, homelessness, etc. and network with other organizations.

### *Values*

As an organization, HeartStrides has three core values that stick out among the rest. Dees, herself, suffered from alcoholism, addiction and trauma starting from a young age. As she works through her recovery, she has been adamant about keeping Healing Hearts Ranch and HeartStrides a safe space to make mistakes and learn from them and

heal. Above all, HeartStrides values integrity, community and empowerment. HeartStrides staff and volunteers are expected to maintain a high level of integrity, transparency and honesty. As an organization, HeartStrides goal is to be as transparent and ethical as possible to promote integrity and similar values in their clients. This organization also values community because they firmly believe we need one another to be successful. Empowerment is also a core value of HeartStrides because it is one of their keys to success. The organization wants to empower individuals to make their own choices and decisions that will reflect their level of comfort and willingness to combat their trauma or other difficult experiences.

### *Challenges*

While HeartStrides has had a great deal of support from the community and individuals, their challenges include organizations doing therapeutic riding with similar groups of participants, lack of knowledge surrounding mental health and addiction issues, lack of understanding the efficacy of equine-assisted learning activities, and securing funding.

### *Other similar organizations*

There are two other organizations in the area that also offer therapeutic horseback riding or some similar therapy that utilizes horses. One of these organizations, called Little Bit Therapeutic Riding Center, is located a few hours north of Healing Hearts

Ranch and was established in 1976. This organization focuses solely on children and adults with disabilities which attracts a great deal of funding (Little Bit Therapeutic Riding 2017). The other organization, Rainier Therapeutic Riding, is located only thirty minutes to the southeast of Healing Hearts Ranch and was established in 2009. It has been known to offer programs similar to the ones offered through HeartStrides. Recently, they have also focused on therapeutic riding programs and horsemanship programs for veterans and first responders, but they have also included workshops and family support classes (Rainier Therapeutic Riding 2017). These similar organizations have been in the area longer and are more established and well-known compared to HeartStrides. They have both made deep connections to the communities around them and developed relationships with foundations who sponsor their programs. It has been difficult for HeartStrides to break through the barriers associated with securing continued funding from foundations (national and local) or local business owners, as well as to gather the much needed publicity, support and connections needed to become well established in the Olympia, WA area.

*Lack of knowledge and/or understanding surrounding animal-assisted therapy*

For those who are unaware of what therapeutic horseback riding or equine-assisted learning activities are, it can be difficult to clearly and concisely inform potential donors about in a way that will convince them to donate. Equine-assisted learning, therapeutic horseback riding, and animal assisted therapies in general, are becoming more popular across the world, as evidenced by a quick Google search which yields hundreds

of thousands of results ranging from news articles, personal experiences and published research. As these types of animal-assisted therapies grow in popularity, it will be critical to continue to implement empirical research, evaluation studies, interviews and focus groups for participants in these programs. Contributing to the growing literature on equine-assisted therapies, and animal assisted therapy in general, is important to demonstrate efficacy and legitimacy for these alternative therapy types (Fine 2000; Dell et al. 2008). Potential donors want to see results and proof that equine-assisted learning activities help the participants. Without proper documentation of results, or not having witnessed the effects themselves, donors find it difficult to provide funding.

If potential donors do not already know about or have witnessed the effects that horses can have on people, they are not as likely to donate to HeartStrides. In order to combat this, Kristy offers to let potential donors sit in on classes or read testimonials, watch promotional videos or participate in a horsemanship class to allow them to see what HeartStrides does and why it is worth investing in. This has helped drive donors toward HeartStrides, but the need for additional funding is still there.

### *Funding*

HeartStrides is a fairly small non-profit and runs on an annual budget of about \$55,000. With the addition of new programs, more volunteers, more clients, and the need to hire more staff, the current budget will need to be expanded soon. The majority of the expenses are used to pay for the horses' care, the insurance and the arena/facilities rental. Fundraisers assist with raising money for the nonprofit to pay for the large expenses, but

also go directly toward paying the mental health professionals and other expenses incurred by the programs (food, drinks, equipment, etc.).

In an effort to make up for lack of foundation funding or large donations, HeartStrides has utilized a variety of methods to raise their own funds. HeartStrides makes a large portion of their fundraised money through t-shirt fundraisers. For each program, HeartStrides has a t-shirt with their logo and the program logo on them that they sell to participants and community members. These funds help to pay for food for participants, arena rental, mental health counselors and to pay the cost of the program so it can be free for participants. HeartStrides also solicits donations from businesses by offering to put their logo on the general HeartStrides t-shirts that are not program specific and are sold to community members. They also receive unsolicited donations from individuals and business owners throughout the community. One of the board members also makes horseshoe art to sell at local bizarres and craft fairs where all the proceeds go to HeartStrides. During the summer of 2016 HeartStrides also began creating a sponsoring program where people can opt to sponsor a horse monthly or yearly to bring in additional funding to cover board, feed and vet bills for the horse they choose which frees up some of the other funding to go towards programs instead of upkeep. This sponsoring program is not currently put into effect, but should be up and running by the summer of 2017. Lastly, Kristy recently began offering horsemanship classes for community members and team building classes (with horses) for businesses to raise awareness and additional funding.

This nonprofit, and others like it, face different obstacles because of the use of animals. Not only does HeartStrides have to pay the normal operating fees, overhead costs, and program costs, but they have to continually pay for the herd upkeep that includes arena maintenance and rental, vet bills, feed, farrier bills, fence maintenance, etc. This easily amounts to thousands of dollars each month. In addition, HeartStrides must keep up to date on insurance and licenses that can be extremely expensive.

*Being a new non-profit and tackling the stigma associated with mental health*

Aside from the additional expenses and the lack of funding already discussed, HeartStrides also faces challenges that are associated with being a fairly new nonprofit organization. They have finally grown to the point that over the past year they have just begun trying to get their name out there and network with other organizations. HeartStrides remained secluded and small until the middle of 2015 when Kristy decided it was time to expand and make more people aware of the services they offered. If it is not enough to be a small, new organization, HeartStrides also faces challenges associated with its focus on mental health, trauma, and victimization. There is a stigma associated with mental health issues, trauma and addiction which leads to a stigma that is sometimes associated with HeartStrides itself (whether intentionally or not). Luckily, HeartStrides has been able to connect with some well-known individuals, businesses and organizations that have helped them navigate where they fit into the community.



*New Programs*

In 2016, HeartStrides added additional equine-assisted learning programs to their schedule that included Hope with Horses aimed at serving middle and high school girls who self-harmed or had suicidal thoughts or tendencies and Operation T.H.R.I.V.E. designed for veterans and military personnel. I was fortunate enough to be present during the planning process, pilot programs and the program implementation. I saw ideas form into program outlines, curriculum development, resources and fundraising put into place and the programs implemented for community members needing these services. The following chapters outline the history, lesson plans, and program evaluations of these two programs.

## CHAPTER 3: HOPE WITH HORSES

### *Background*

Dees, HeartStrides staff, and volunteers have worked hard throughout 2016 on their main goal of reducing the stigma surrounding mental health and addiction issues in their community. Olympia, Lacey and Tumwater have seen issues with drug abuse and alcoholism in the past few years. These three towns have also seen many instances of self-harm, suicide and homelessness among their youth (Child and Youth Resilience Action Team 2014). In Thurston County, suicide is the second leading cause of death for youth ages 15 to 24 (Child and Youth Resilience Action Team 2014). Within their goal of reducing stigma, the HeartStrides team is also working to reduce the stigma associated with mental health issues resulting from traumatic experiences.

At the beginning of 2016, HeartStrides was in a position to expand their programs and cater to new populations. The idea of offering a program to the local youth that focused on recovery, resiliency, and hope had been on Dees's mind for a while, and in the spring of 2016 she was finally given the opportunity to partner with another nonprofit organization that worked with at-risk youth in Olympia, WA called TOGETHER! With the partnership between HeartStrides and TOGETHER!, Dees was excited to expand and offer a program for girls suffering from self-harm and/or suicidal thoughts or tendencies. TOGETHER! had valuable connections to the local middle and high schools and was able to share the information for the program with faculty, staff and parents.

Dees and a local high school basketball coach worked closely to create a seven-week long after school program for local girls ages 12 to 17 years old. Hope with Horses was centered on the idea of teaching girls to be resilient and for overcoming traumatic experiences that led to self-harm or suicidal thoughts/tendencies through the use of horses as a therapy partner. Dees has witnessed herself and others recover from traumatic experiences using horses to reestablish what a healthy relationship looks like and she knew the horses could help the girls do the same. The program started April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2016 and ended June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016. If HeartStrides and TOGETHER can acquire additional funding, more dates are being planned for the spring and fall of 2017.

The after school program was designed for all skills levels, including girls who have had previous experience with horses or those who have never been around horses before. The program included various equine-assisted learning activities and exercises that promoted self-esteem, self-worth, emotional maturity, and positive and healthy communication skills and was developed with feedback from certified mental health counselors who work with this particular population. During the Hope with Horses program, the girls would come to Healing Hearts Ranch on Thursdays after school during the seven-week timeframe. The goal for the program, was to increase the girls' scores on a resiliency quiz and a hope scale that measured agency, pathways and overall hope scores. Additionally, Dees and the rest of the team hoped to teach the girls new skills to cope with issues like peer pressure, traumatic experiences, abuse, and depression. The girls spent a majority of the time working with the entire group of participants, but there were also opportunities for each girl to spend one-on-one time with a horse.

The girls learned some basic skills of handling, interacting and communicating with horses, but most of the attention was placed on the girls learning the skills from observing the horses and applying their body language and interactions to situations or scenarios with people. When participating in the equine-assisted learning activities, the girls would use their own strengths and challenges to build a trusting relationship with their horse partner and to learn to be authentic in their intentions with humans (and horses).

While in the group, the girls opened up to one another and to the peer counselors and certified mental health counselors. They discussed their strengths and challenges, their problems with family or friends, past trauma, and self-harming or suicidal behavior. In activities with the other girls in a group setting, the girls learned to work together and view each other as friends instead of competition. They also grew closer as they shared their stories and learned from one another.

### *Lesson Plan*

The Hope with Horses sessions started after school between 2:30 and 3pm on Thursday afternoons and were about two hours long. The lessons were led by the facilitators including Kristy Dees, the mental health counselor, myself and one of Dees's staff members. For the girls who could, they would ride the school bus to Healing Hearts Ranch once school let out. For the girls that were not able to ride a bus to the ranch, they would either get rides with family or friends or a volunteer would pick them up from

school to bring them to the ranch. The first session was mostly dedicated to familiarizing the girls with the counselors and staff, the barn, and the horses and to lay down some ground rules about how to conduct themselves near horses and on ranch property. During the first session, the girls and counselors together made a Hope with Horses Group Safety Agreement where they agreed upon seven “rules” that the group adhered to throughout the duration of the program. This agreement included:

- You has the right to say “no” to any activity you do not want to participate in, but be willing to step out of your comfort zone and learn from the horses.
- Ask for help if you need it. Bring up anything that does not feel safe.
- Only tell your own story. Do not go out and share other’s stories. Stay open and non-judgmental of others when they are sharing.
- Respect other people’s stuff, both emotional and physical.
- Keep a sense of humor, and be willing to learn from mistakes.
- Work from honesty and authenticity.
- Support each other in the greater good, just like the horse herd.

During the seven weekly sessions, the program focused on topics relating to feelings and emotions, conflict, self-control, assertiveness, and new ways to face life’s challenges. The lessons also allowed the girls to learn about herd behavior, body language and communication, safety and horsemanship.

*Feelings and emotions*

The lesson on feelings and emotions covered what happens when people avoid feelings and how to work with feelings and emotions in a more productive manner. The lesson began by asking the girls to recall a moment when they suppressed or avoided their feelings. The girls share their stories and then began discussing with one another why they felt the need to avoid their feelings in the situation they shared. The program facilitators shared their stories and the outcomes and disadvantages of not allowing themselves to feel their emotions.

Dees (2016c) explained that many people spend their entire lives avoiding their feelings when it is actually easier and healthier in the long run to acknowledge one's feelings and learn to work with them. By avoiding one's feelings, it is very difficult to have a sense of oneself and can lead to destructive lifestyles (Dees, 2016c). The lesson went on to describe some basic feelings including mad, sad, glad, afraid, and hurt.

Being mad or angry is an emotional response to not liking or agreeing with something or someone. It was explained to the participants that mad is not a behavior (like yelling or slamming a door), it is a feeling that is not right, wrong, good or bad. Sad or sadness was described as the emotional response to loss. Being glad was described as a feeling that people get when their needs or wants are met or when there is an emotional balance in their lives. It is emphasized that happiness is not a "destination," it is an everyday experience. Feeling afraid or fear was defined as a healthy response to the unknown and is important because it gives people a clue that something is wrong and tells them to act accordingly. Hurt is experienced when someone you care about violates

your trust and is a person's most intimate feeling because it requires a closer relationship. A person cannot feel hurt by someone they do not know personally (Dees 2016c).

Additionally, the program covered feeling shame and guilt. Dees (2016c) defined shame as a self-conscious emotion that informs a person about the internal state of inadequacy, unworthiness, dishonor or regret. Shame can be triggered by another person, a situation, or even from failing to meet one's own standards. Dees (2016c) emphasized that feeling shame can make a person feel flawed or bad and can make them want to hide themselves. The difference between guilt and shame was also defined because many of the girls were unaware of the difference. Guilt was defined as feeling as though you did something bad, while shame tells a person they are bad. At this point in the lesson, the girls discussed their own instances of feeling these various emotions and were asked to think about the source of the various feelings in a situation they choose to discuss. For example, one of the girls spoke of feeling shame when her mother and grandmother spoke badly about her physical appearance and another girl spoke of feeling a mix of emotions when her friends found out she was suicidal.

After discussing feelings as a group and processing everyone's stories, the facilitators then discussed how to work with feelings and emotions. Six steps were outlined for the group:

1. Recognize the emotion.
2. Accept the emotion.
3. Experience the emotion.
4. Express the emotion safely and appropriately.

5. What is the message behind your emotion?
6. Move forward with the information your feelings and emotions have given you about a situation and navigate obstacles or make appropriate changes.

Using these steps, the participants were instructed to practice expressing their feelings and emotions appropriately and safely with one another to understand the difference between having their emotions handle them or have them handle their emotions (Dees 2016c).

### *Anger*

Following the lesson on feelings and emotions, the group focused specifically on anger, as a lot of the participants expressed concern that their anger gets in the way of their friendships and relationships (both family and romantic). To begin, Dees mentioned studies done on anger and how horses can tell when a person is happy or angry. Dees spoke about the horses' ability to read human facial expressions and body language to determine how to respond appropriately and to keep themselves safe. She told the girls about times when she came to the barn to ride or interact with the horses while angry and how differently the horses react to her compared to when she is feeling other emotions.

A horse was brought in to demonstrate the reaction they have when approached by someone who is angry versus someone who is happy or more mellow. The girls were instructed to watch the reaction of the horse for body language that would show the horse is stressed or concerned or if the horse is calm. When Dees approached and acted angry, the horse raised its head, became tense, and focused on Dees. When Dees approached and



acted happy and calm, the horse responded by also acting calm and showing signs of relaxation such as lowering their head, relaxed ears, yawning, licking and chewing. In this portion of the lesson, the group compared a horse's reaction to how people act when approached by someone who is visibly angry or upset versus being approached by someone who is happy or calm. Horses and people alike become visibly more anxious and defensive when approached by an angry person (or other threat) because they are recognizing their body language and facial expressions as a warning system (Dees 2016c).

For horses, the warning system associated with angry humans allows horses to anticipate negative human behavior such as being whipped or handled roughly. For humans, Dees explained that it is harder to communicate with someone if you approach them angrily because they begin to get defensive or shut themselves down to save themselves from the anger or discomfort (Dees 2016c).

From here, the girls were given worksheets on the cycle of anger and anger warning signs. The program covered the cycle of anger with the participants and described the five components: triggering event, negative thoughts, emotional response, physical symptoms, behavior response (TherapistAid 2017). The girls had the opportunity to go through the cycle with the group by sharing some of the events that trigger anger for them, what negative thoughts came from the event, what their emotional response was, what physical symptoms they had and with what behavior they responded.

The group then moved onto the warning signs of anger and how the girls can learn to recognize their own signs. The anger warning signs worksheet was handed to

each participant and the girls were given time to circle the warning signs that applied to them. These warning signs included “face turns red,” “crying,” “shutting down,” “can’t stop thinking about the problem,” etc. (TherapistAid 2017). The girls were given a few minutes to share their warning signs and discuss amongst each other with the help of the mental health counselor how each other handles situations when they are angry.

The lesson concluded by comparing anger warning signs between horses and humans and having the girls reflect on what they learned about their own anger issues. The girls were instructed to consider their warning signs at home and school for the next week and to report back to the group the following week about the signs they noticed.

### *Dealing with conflict*

Conflict was a major source of anxiety and emotional turmoil for the girls. The lesson for dealing with conflict concentrated on conflict with family members, but also briefly discussed conflict with friends and intimate partners. The lesson began by acknowledging that every person has conflict at some point in their lives and it can be caused by a number of things including lack of communication or a difference in values. The facilitators and the girls then spent some time brainstorming other reasons that conflicts occur. Some of the reasons mentioned included changes in the family or relationship, wanting to be more independent, expectations, and pressure (Dees 2016c).

After discussing various reasons for conflict, the group discussed what can be done in these situations. They mentioned that trying to understand the other person’s perspective, counting to ten before responding or getting some space are all excellent

ways to handle conflict in the moment. The girls were given additional time to brainstorm other ways to respond or cool down before responding and then moved into a discussion about talking about the conflict with the other person to come to a resolution. Dees and the counselor provided the girls with a list of different actions to take when “talking it out.” This list included waiting until no one is angry, upset or stressed out, going somewhere where you will not be interrupted, do not make your comments or responses personal, be honest, listen to what they have to say and accept that their point of view may be different but just as valid as your own, once a compromise is agreed to then stick to it, and if talking seems impossible send an email or write a letter explaining how you feel (Dees 2016c). The facilitators also discussed “agreeing to disagree” for the moments when a compromise or resolution will not be reached and the girls all gave examples of incidents where they have had to “agree to disagree” with their parents or friends.

Additionally, the lesson addressed the issue of when a conflict becomes dangerous or threatens someone’s safety. The girls were instructed to reach out to other family members or a trusted adult if they ever felt like they were in danger and were provided with numbers for services they could call if they needed assistance. It was also discussed that sometimes the conflict can lead the girls to feeling helpless and alone which contributed to their self-harm or suicidal thoughts/tendencies. Some of the girls shared their own stories and the others offered their ways to cope with conflict and who they turn to when they are afraid for their safety.

*Self-control*

The lesson for self-control involved more observing and interacting with the horses. The girls were able to use a horse as a learning partner for this lesson. Self-control in regards to horsemanship was highlighted first so the girls understood what was expected of them while working with the horses. Being calm, quiet, confident and firm when approaching, haltering, and grooming the horses was emphasized. By having self-control to not reach out and pet every horse in the pasture or barn stalls, and by controlling oneself in the arena and during the lessons, the girls were shown the importance of maintaining that level of self-control in all situations so others know they can be trusted and are capable of coping with stress and emotions. Dees explained the problem with lacking self-control was coming off too aggressively or showing no control over one's emotions or impulses. With horses, for example, if someone runs up to them because they are overly excited to pet them, the horse would more than likely get frightened and run away. Likewise, it was explained that if one of the girls found themselves in a conflict with a family member and began yelling and screaming instead of calmly expressing their needs and concerns, they would be seen as immature and not be taken seriously (Dees 2016c).

During this lesson, the group covered different methods for relaxing, refocusing and calming to give the girls small tasks to do when confronted with tension or stress as a way to better handle their emotions. The girls were taught the four step method using the "4 B's" or self-control which include brake, breathe, brain and body. During brake, the girls were instructed to press their hands firmly together for three to five seconds, release

and repeat three times. Braking is a way to stop excess energy and give the body time to stop what it is doing. After braking, the girls were instructed to try calming breathing exercises where they place their hands over their belly buttons and take three to five slow breaths that make their stomach area fill up with air and not just their chest cavity. Once they've completed the breathing exercises, the girls then worked on their brain. They were asked to interlace their fingers and gently press down on their head ten times. By doing this, the girls would "wake up" their brain and become more alert. Lastly, the girls were told to firmly hug themselves with their hands on their shoulders to alert the rest of their body. This lesson helped the girls learn a new way to release tension or stress and regain focus. The "4B's" were useful for them as a calming minute to refocus and situate themselves before relying on their emotions and not considering the situation or circumstances (Dees 2016c).

### *Assertiveness*

The lesson on assertiveness also covered passiveness and assertive communication. Dees described assertiveness as being a type of confidence that allows someone to communicate clearly what their needs, wants and feelings are without hurting anyone. She explained to the girls that assertiveness can be a key component of healthy relationships and can also leave them feeling more relaxed and confident while having more control over their life.

For this lesson, being assertive was defined as being honest without being rude or hurtful, telling others what you really want or need, being respectful of yourself and

others, and not intentionally hurting people. Assertiveness was described as being the balance between passiveness and aggression (Dees 2016c). Many of the girls discussed feeling as though they approach different conflicts by being too passive or too aggressive. As a group they discussed how they acted when being too passive or too aggressive. The girls mentioned when being too passive they often put other's needs first, put themselves down, said "it doesn't matter," did not say what they really wanted or needed and let others make a decision for them. When they were being too aggressive they made sure they got what they wanted at the expense of other's feelings, told people hurtful things, made choices for others and hurt others to get what they wanted.

The horses were used to better explain and demonstrate assertive behavior. It was explained that being around horses, humans need to make sure their intentions are clear and sincere. If a human acts too passive in their actions, a horse will ignore them or the horse may act as alpha or leader of the herd and place the human in a lower position in the herd's social order. On the other hand, if a human acts too aggressively, the horse responds out of fear and may believe the human is a predator. In order to have a good relationship with your horse, Dees explained to the girls that they must be authentic, honest and assertive in their actions and behaviors and this is no different when communicating with friends, family or other people they may encounter. By being assertive, the girls could then be respectful of themselves and their own rights and respectful of others (horses and people) and their rights.

When practicing being assertive with the horses and with each other, the girls found themselves feeling more confident and more successful in negotiating their wants

and needs. The girls practiced listening carefully, reading body language, speaking clearly and staying calm and relaxed during the conversation. Working directly with the horses allowed the girls to practice reading body language and staying calm. To ‘listen’ to a horse, the girls had to understand their body language and stay calm to get the horse to move around the round pen in the direction they instructed. This type of round pen work, commonly known as liberty work, allowed the girls to form a strong bond with the horse and to recognize that they do have the power and agency to move a thousand pound animal by being assertive, authentic and calm which made it easier for them to recognize that they can be assertive with adults, siblings, friends, teachers, and so forth. Liberty work can be frustrating at first, but once the girls understood how to be confident in their own abilities to recognize what they wanted to horse to do and did not let their anger or frustration get the best of them, they realized the value of being aware of their own body language, making sure their emotions were not too strong when trying to convey their thoughts and feelings, and for not being accusatory when a situation does not go as planned.

Once they had completed some round pen work with the horses to establish their assertiveness in that situation, the girls then practiced with each other in the group setting. Each participant brought up a scenario that they had experienced and they practiced different responses and practiced listening, saying “no,” watching body language and using “I” statements instead of “you” statements. The girls found that they received a better response when they said “I feel differently” instead of saying “you are wrong.”

Additionally, with this lesson, the group discussed the harm caused when using aggressive responses as a tool to protect ourselves when we are upset or angry. Many of the girls came to the program using aggressive communication styles and this lesson was designed to teach them assertiveness instead of aggressiveness as an alternative tool to keeping them safe from harm and protecting their feelings and emotions while still allowing them to convey what they need or want. The group discussed at length the difference between aggressive and assertive communication styles and why assertive communication is more productive and leads to better outcomes.

Most of the girls reported that when they are angry or upset they raise their voice or use strong language to make themselves feel more intimidating. Many of them also had the attitude of “winning” at all costs and not caring about the other person in the scenario they shared. The group discussed problems associated with this behavior and how they were using their aggression as walls to keep others from getting too close to them. The lesson emphasized the need for compromise and being considerate of others while trying to reach a common goal. Being mindful of others’ boundaries and setting their own boundaries was also highlighted. The group examined their feelings surrounding their aggression. The girls discussed using aggression as a response to feeling powerless in their situations, but it was explained to the girls that being assertive would allow for more direct, open and honest communication which involves their own power. Lastly, the lesson focused on explaining that being assertive meant being able to take criticism well, receiving feedback and actively working to improve their



relationships (Dees 2016c).

### *Facing life challenges*

This lesson concentrated on speaking, listening, and reacting versus responding. As a follow up to the lesson on assertive communication and behavior, the group discussed the concepts of “speaking to be known” and “listening out of curiosity.” This portion of the lesson was broken into two parts; talking format and listening format. As a group, they discussed more productive ways to approach a situation or scenario where the girls needed their thoughts, worries, and opinions heard. Just as with the assertive communication, the group had a more lengthy discussion about using “I” statements so as not to sound accusatory when discussing their feelings or problems. It was suggested that the girls use statements such as “When I heard/saw you...,” “What I thought about this was...” During this first section of the lesson, the girls got into groups of two and practiced using these “I” statements with one another for a variety of scenarios that were provided by the mental health counselor that included talking to one’s parents, a peer pressure situation, and discussing grades with a teacher. The girls shared their feelings and expressed their concerns using only “I” statements and compared that to their normal responses which tended to use statements that insinuated blame on the other person’s part such as “You are wrong about...” or “you always make me mad...” (Dees 2016c).

The listening portion focused on taking the time to really understand what the other person is saying, reading their body language and then deciding how you feel about what you were listening to. The girls spoke of situations with their friends where they

listened, but jumped to conclusions and never let them finish their side of a story. It was explained how important it is to let someone speak and finish their thoughts so that you can properly respond. To be a better listener, one must also consider how they feel about what is being said so they can have the appropriate response. The group discussed instances where the conversation is between the girls and their friends or an intimate partner and how valuable it is to listen out of curiosity because in those moments, the other party is potentially going outside of their comfort zone to express their thoughts, feelings or concerns. The girls were given different scenarios to practice with a partner. They were asked to decide if they agreed, disagreed or were confused about what their partner said. If they agreed, they would say something like “I agree with you...I feel (emotion) about that...” If they disagreed, they would state “I have a different perspective/observation/understanding...would you like to hear that? If they were confused by what they heard, they would say “I am confused about (topic). Could you give me more information/explain it in a different way...” (Dees 2016c).

After going through some new ways to respond to situations by talking and listening in a different manner than they were accustomed to, the girls were asked if they believed there was a difference between “having” a reaction and “making” a response. Most the girls agreed that there was a difference, but were unsure how to articulate what they specifically thought was the difference. For this portion of the lesson, some of the horses were reintroduced to demonstrate.

Five horses were brought in from the herd so the girls could participate in another herd observation. This portion of the lesson focused on reactions. A reaction has more to

do with a physical or emotional consequence that is caused by some sort of stimulus. The stimulus could be spoken or written words, actions or even a physical condition such as hot or cold, sharp objects, a fall, etc. A response, on the other hand, was defined as understanding one's emotions in the moment, moving past the original emotional reaction to the stimulus, and carefully calculating the next move or waiting to understand more of the stimulus (Dees 2016c).

Dees used a plastic bag and a hula hoop to introduce a new situation to the herd of horses in the arena. The girls watched as one of the younger horses began getting anxious, pushed his ears back, and became more restless. The alpha mare of the herd showed a different response; she remained calm, pushed the other horses away from the bag and hula hoop and cautiously approached Dees from the side. The facilitators led a discussion on the differences between these two displays and determined the younger horse reacted while the alpha mare responded. The girls were asked what they thought makes a horse more naturally reactionary and they responded with the fact that they are prey animals and have to defend themselves against predators or situations that put them at risk. They took some time to think about how this relates to situations that make them more reactive and the girls were particularly insightful and open about some situations they've found themselves in. Many of the girls shared stories of reacting when they felt vulnerable and were using their reactions as a sort of self-defense mechanism. The girls were then asked if there were situations where a reaction is more valuable or if they thought there were situations where a reaction could make things more dangerous. The girls spoke of instances where a reaction could protect them more if they are in danger

because it would cause more of a commotion and get people to pay attention. However, the girls decided that when dealing with a situation with their parents or a teacher, a response would probably be a better choice because they felt their concerns would be taken more seriously than if they threw a fit.

Following this herd observation, the other horses were removed, but Dees kept her alpha mare, Remy, in the arena to show another example of reaction versus a response. Dees did some work with Remy in the arena to demonstrate response. She moved Remy in a circle around her and asked her to walk, trot and canter. By giving her the appropriate signals to do what is asked of her, Remy responded by performing the actions requested of her. If Dees had approached Remy in a different manner and began asking her to walk, trot and canter, but without the appropriate signals and using forceful actions (such as yelling, using a whip, hitting her, etc.) Remy would have offered a reaction instead because her emotions would take over in a panic to flee the situation she was in.

Once the demonstration with the horses was over, the girls were brought back into a group to discuss in more detail reactions versus responses and how the girls could practice this in their daily lives. While it was acknowledged that there are some situations where reactions are more valuable, the girls recognized that they often reacted to situations where a response would have sufficient for conveying their thoughts and feelings in a more productive manner. It was explained to the girls that responses are conscious decisions, while reactions are often self-protective and a defense mechanism which makes it easier for a reaction to occur. Responses take a lot more energy because

you need to make the conscious choice to move past the initial emotions and carefully calculate the next choice. The group discussed how different it is being around a horse who is more responsive and the girls were quick to acknowledge that the horses who responded instead of reacted felt safer to be around. The girls were asked what they thought effected the horse so it could respond instead of react and the girls stated that they were in a safe environment, they trusted Dees (who was working with them), and were aware of their surroundings.

For the girls, working through the differences with the horses who reacted and responded helped them see what could be different in their own lives. The session concluded by asking the girls to think about ways that they could work on becoming more responsive in their lives and how it would benefit both them and others they interact with. One of the girls brought up a specific situation with a teacher at school. She said their conversations always ended with her screaming at her teacher for not listening to her or understanding what she needed. As a group, the girls talked through this and decided a calmer response would probably lead to better results because the girl could remain calm, express her needs and concerns more clearly without letting emotions take over and be able to get to the real issues without causing more stress. The girls concluded that in safe situations, a reaction results in them giving away their power to the other party and succumbing to their emotions, but a response allows them to own their emotions and stay in control of themselves while clearly articulating their needs or concerns.

### *Program Evaluation*

In early 2016, HeartStrides staff and board members realized that a major part of receiving grant funding would be demonstrating their programs work. Once the Hope with Horses program began to be developed, Dees knew the organization needed a way to measure the overall success or failure of the program and the parts that went well and the parts that needed to be reevaluated for the next program session. After a lengthy discussion over the goals of the program, Dees and program staff decided to implement two separate surveys. With her background in mental health, Dees chose a Resiliency Quiz created by Dr. Al Siebert to gauge any changes in the girls' perceived levels of resilience. Dees also chose the Hope (Future) Scale Quiz created by C.R. Snyder to gauge changes in the girls' perceived levels of hope, pathways to higher thinking and agency. Both of the surveys were given at the beginning and the end of the seven-week program so pre- and post-data could be analyzed. The girls participating in the program were encouraged to complete the surveys on their own, but were offered assistance if needed.

### *Resiliency quiz analysis and results*

The Resiliency Quiz (Appendix A) was originally created by Dr. Al Siebert of the Al Siebert Resiliency Center, and was created to measure how resilient a person is at the time of taking the quiz. This particular document, however, was taken from the Courage Project, created by Megan Raphael. Raphael used the same resiliency quiz for her work empowering women (Raphael 2009). Dees chose this quiz because she sought to actively

measure the impact Hope with Horses curriculum had on the girls' perceived level of resiliency before and after the completion of the program. The quiz included twenty statements and used a Likert-type five-point scale with 5 being 'very strong' and 1 being 'very little' to rate the statements.

I had intended on analyzing these survey results using chi-square to compare the means for pre- and post-test, however, the N size (ranging from 5 to 7 depending on the statement) was not great enough for this analysis to show statistical significance (or lack thereof) and the results would not have been reliable. Instead, I chose to create a chart that compared the difference in the means (see Table 1) by indicating whether or not there was an increase or a decrease in the means for each of the twenty statements on the quiz. Though this analysis does not show statistical significance, it gives me and HeartStrides staff a look at the impact the curriculum had on the girls' resilience scores. From pre- to post-testing, there was an increase in the mean scores for seventeen out of the twenty statements on the Resiliency Quiz. In this situation, the increase indicates some level of effectiveness of the learning outcomes for the curriculum in place for Hope with Horses.

Five of the statements had over a 0.5 increase in the mean from pre- to post-test. "I am a good listener. I have good empathy skills" increased by 0.76 points, "in a crisis or chaotic situation, I calm myself and focus on taking useful actions" increased by 0.71 points, "I'm usually optimistic. I see difficulties as temporary and expect to overcome them" and "I feel self-confident, appreciate myself, and have a healthy concept of who I am" both increased by 0.69 points, and lastly, "I can tolerate high levels of ambiguity and

uncertainty about situations” increased by 0.52 points. These statements point out multiple skills that were discussed and improved upon with the curriculum for Hope with Horses such as the lessons on listening, feeling confident, empathy and understanding of situations from another point of view, dealing with conflict and facing challenges.

While a majority of the means increased, there were three means that decreased from the pre- to post-test. “I "read" people well and trust my intuition” saw the mean decrease by 0.5 points. “I'm able to recover emotionally from losses and setbacks. I have friends I can talk with, I can express my feelings to others and ask for help. Feelings of anger, loss and discouragement don't last long” decreased 0.38 points. These decreases are fairly large and could be a topic to explore or check in with participants during the next program session. The decreases may also suggest some areas of the curriculum that could be improved. These two statements seem to be about self-confidence and their ability to recover and/or control their emotions. While the lesson on emotions seemed to have made an impact on the girls, there is some room for improvement. The HeartStrides team could potentially introduce a longer lesson with more activities that are aimed at working through emotions and developing a higher sense of self-confidence.

“I'm good at making things work well. I'm often asked to lead groups and projects” saw the mean decrease by 0.26 points. While this last decrease is smaller than the other two, it suggests that perhaps there could be an added lesson to the curriculum for the next program that focuses more on leadership skills. It may be beneficial to create a lesson plan that includes allowing each participant a time slot for leading an activity or demonstration so they are able to have hands-on practice leading groups and projects.



Table 1. Resiliency Outcomes

	PRE-SURVEY RESULTS (April 2016)					POST-SURVEY RESULTS (June 2016)						
Survey Question	N	M i n	M a x	Mean	Std. Devia tion	N	M i n	M a x	Mean	Std. Devia tion	Difference in Mean	Effectiveness of Learning Outcomes
In a crisis or chaotic situation, I calm myself and focus on taking useful actions.	7	1	3	2.29	0.756	6	1	4	3.00	1.095	0.71	increase
I'm usually optimistic. I see difficulties as temporary and expect to overcome them.	7	2	4	2.71	0.951	5	1	4	3.40	1.342	0.69	increase
I can tolerate high levels of ambiguity and uncertainty about situations.	7	1	4	2.14	1.069	6	1	3	2.67	0.816	0.52	increase
I adapt quickly to new developments. I'm good at bouncing back from difficulties.	7	2	4	3.14	1.069	6	1	5	3.50	1.643	0.36	increase
I'm playful. I find the humor in rough situations, and can laugh at myself.	6	1	5	3.67	1.506	6	2	5	3.83	1.169	0.17	increase
I'm able to recover emotionally from losses and setbacks. I have friends I can talk with, I can express my feelings to others and ask for help. Feelings of anger, loss and discouragement don't last long.	7	2	5	3.71	1.113	6	1	4	3.33	1.211	-0.38	decrease

	<b>PRE-SURVEY RESULTS (April 2016)</b>					<b>POST-SURVEY RESULTS (June 2016)</b>						
I feel self-confident, appreciate myself, and have a healthy concept of who I am.	7	1	5	2.14	1.464	6	1	5	2.83	1.472	0.69	increase
I'm curious. I ask questions. I want to know how things work. I like to try new ways of doing things.	7	2	5	3.71	1.113	6	2	5	3.83	1.169	0.12	increase
I learn valuable lessons from my experiences and from the experiences of others.	7	2	5	3.71	1.380	6	3	5	4.00	0.632	0.29	increase
I'm good at solving problems. I can use analytical logic, be creative or use practical common sense.	7	1	5	3.29	1.496	6	1	5	3.33	1.506	0.05	increase
I'm good at making things work well. I'm often asked to lead groups and projects.	7	1	5	3.43	1.512	6	1	5	3.17	1.835	-0.26	decrease
I'm very flexible. I feel comfortable with my paradoxical complexity. I'm optimistic and pessimistic, trusting and cautious, unselfish and selfish, and so forth.	7	1	5	3.14	1.676	6	1	5	3.50	1.643	0.36	increase
I'm always myself, but I've noticed that I'm different in different situations.	7	2	5	3.71	1.380	6	3	5	3.83	0.753	0.12	increase
I prefer to work without a written job description. I'm more effective when I'm free	7	1	5	2.86	1.464	6	2	4	3.17	0.753	0.31	increase

	<b>PRE-SURVEY RESULTS (April 2016)</b>					<b>POST-SURVEY RESULTS (June 2016)</b>							
to do what I think is best in each situation.													
I "read" people well and trust my intuition.	7	2	5	4.00	1.414	6	1	5	3.50	1.761	-0.50	decrease	
I'm a good listener. I have good empathy skills.	7	1	5	3.57	1.618	6	3	5	4.33	1.033	0.76	increase	
I'm non-judgmental about others and adapt to people's different personality styles.	7	1	5	3.71	1.380	6	3	5	4.17	0.753	0.45	increase	
I'm very durable. I hold up well during tough times. I have an independent spirit underneath my cooperative way of working with others.	7	2	5	3.71	1.380	6	3	4	3.83	0.408	0.12	increase	
I've been made stronger and better by difficult experiences.	7	2	5	4.14	1.215	6	2	5	4.33	1.211	0.19	increase	
I've converted misfortune into good luck and found benefits in bad experiences.	7	2	4	3.14	0.690	6	1	5	3.50	1.378	0.36	increase	

*Hope (future) scale analysis and results*

The Hope (Future) Scale Quiz (Appendix B) was originally created by C.R. Snyder of the University of Kansas. This scale was intended to measure Snyder's cognitive model of hope "which defines hope as 'a positive motivational state that is based on an interactively derived sense of successful (a) agency (goal-directed energy), and (b) pathways (planning to meet goals)'" (Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania 2017). The twelve statements included four that measured agency thinking, four that measured pathways thinking and four that were fillers (Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania 2017). This quiz contains twelve statements and used a Likert-type eight-point scale with 8 being 'definitely true' and 1 being 'definitely false' to rate the statements. From these twelve statements, the Agency, Pathways and total Hope scores are calculated by adding the scores from specific statements. The score for Agency is calculated by adding the scores from items 2, 9, 10 and 12. Scores range from 4 to 32. Higher scores reflect higher agency. The score for Pathways is calculated by adding the scores from items 1, 4, 6 and 8. Higher scores reflect higher pathways thinking. The score for total Hope is calculated by adding the Agency and Pathways scores together. Scores of 40-48 are hopeful, 48-56 moderately hopeful, and 56 or higher as high hope.

Dees chose this quiz because she wanted to know if the lessons in the Hope with Horses program had any impact on goal setting and their desire to achieve the goals they make. She thought this quiz would provide a good indication of their level of hope for their future as well as the individual agency and pathways scores. This quiz was also chosen because it provided a good explanation of how to interpret the scores.

Originally, I had intended on analyzing these survey results in two ways. Chi-square analysis was going to be used to compare the pre- and post-test means of the Likert-type scale statements, however my N size (ranging from 6 to 7 depending on the statement) was not large enough for this analysis to show statistical significance (or lack thereof) and the results would not have been reliable. The sums that made up the Agency, Pathways and Hope scores were going to be analyzed using a t-test, but the assumptions were not met with such a small N size.

To combat the issues associated with a small N size, I had to go a different route that does not test for statistical significance, but would allow us to see an increase or decrease in the means of the scores. I created a chart that compared the differences in the means for the Likert-type scale statements and indicated whether or not there was an increase or decrease in the means for each statement (see Table 2). For the sums of the Agency, Pathways and Hope scores, I created another chart similar to Table 2 that showed whether or not there was an increase or a decrease in the means for each of the scores (see Table 3). Though these type of analysis does not show statistical significance, it gives me and the HeartStrides staff a general look at the impact the curriculum had on the girls' Agency, Pathways and overall Hope scores.

From pre- to post-testing, there was a decrease in scores for statement numbers 1, 6, 8 and 11. The remaining eight statements all showed an increase in scores (see Table 2). Statements 1, 6, and 8 were three of the four items added together to get the Pathways score. "I can think of many ways to get out of a jam" showed a large decrease of 0.79 points. "I can think of many ways to get the things in life that are important to me" saw a

very large decrease in scores of 1.52 points. “Even when others get discourages, I know I can find a way to solve the problem” saw a decrease of 0.10 points. Because we see the decrease in scores on the statements that make up the Pathways scores, we see that Pathways is the only sum of scores that decreased overall (see Table 3). Number 11 was a filler statement and showed a minor decrease of 0.05 points. This statement discussed feeling as though they usually are worrying about something and could be an area to explore in future programs.

The scores for Agency, Pathways and Hope can give us a clearer idea of the level of impact the program had on the girls’ ability to set goals, plan to meet goals and their overall hope for the future. Table 3 shows the mean of each score and indicates and increase in both Agency and overall Hope and a decrease in Pathways. The mean for Agency scores increase by 1.97 points, Hope increased by 0.96 points and Pathways saw a decrease of 1.03 points. Given that many of the lessons covered topics related to self-confidence, dealing with emotions, etc., it seems reasonable to see the increase in overall Hope scores from pre- to post-tests. Seeing an increase in Agency also seems reasonable because many of the lessons were geared toward the girls setting goals for themselves to increase their self-confidence, work towards responding instead of reacting and working towards managing their emotions.

The decrease in Pathways could be explained by a number of aspects. The decrease in Pathways could be accounted for by considering the three statements (items 1, 6, and 8 for the Likert-type scale statements) that touched on thinking of many ways to get out of a jam, thinking of many ways to get the things in life that are important to

them, and finding ways to solve the problem when others get discouraged. Not only could these answers decrease just based on the fact that these are adolescents and they lack the maturity and life-experiences that an adult may possess, but it can be speculated that the exposure to some of the exercises and lessons in this program made them realize they do not have the knowledge to always help themselves and there are situations where they are still learning and may need to seek the assistance of a trusted adult. Additionally, not all adolescents know all the proper steps needed to achieve the goals they set or how to begin sketching out the steps needed. This group of girls appeared to be fairly familiar with goal setting, just based on comments made throughout the program, but we did not touch on steps to reach their goals. This is an area to explore for future program sessions. Perhaps having a lesson specifically catering towards teaching the youth how to plan to meet the goals they set would boost this score.

While the overall Hope score is considered the most important aspect of this quiz, having the individual scores for Agency, Pathways and even the individual statements are useful for considering any changes made to the curriculum for future program sessions.

Table 2. Hope (Future) Scale Outcomes Overall

	PRE-SURVEY RESULTS (April 2016)					POST-SURVEY RESULTS (June 2016)						
Survey Question	N	M	M	Mean	Std. Devia	N	M	M	Mean	Std. Devia	Difference in Mean	Effectiveness of Learning Outcomes
		i	a		tion		i	a		tion		
		n	x				n	x				
I can think of many ways to get out of a jam.	7	5	8	6.29	1.113	6	3	7	5.50	1.517	-0.79	decrease
I energetically pursue my goals.	7	4	7	5.71	1.113	6	4	8	6.17	1.722	0.45	increase
I feel tired most of the time.	7	1	8	5.57	2.507	6	6	8	7.00	1.095	1.43	increase
There are lots of ways around any problem.	7	4	8	6.29	1.380	6	7	8	7.67	0.516	1.38	increase
I am easily downed in an argument.	7	1	7	4.14	2.478	6	2	8	5.00	2.449	0.86	increase
I can think of many ways to get the things in life that are most important to me.	7	6	8	6.86	0.690	6	4	7	5.33	1.033	-1.52	decrease
I worry about my health.	7	3	8	4.71	1.704	6	1	8	5.17	2.483	0.45	increase
Even when others get discouraged, I know I can find a way to solve the problem.	7	5	7	6.43	0.787	6	4	8	6.33	1.366	-0.10	decrease
My past experiences have prepared me well for my future.	7	4	8	6.71	1.380	6	5	8	6.83	1.472	0.12	increase
I've been pretty successful in life.	7	1	7	4.71	1.976	6	4	7	5.67	1.211	0.95	increase
I usually find myself worrying about something.	7	4	8	6.71	1.704	6	5	8	6.67	1.211	-0.05	decrease
I meet the goals that I set for myself.	7	4	7	5.71	1.113	6	4	7	6.17	1.169	0.45	increase



Table 3. Hope (Future) Scale Agency, Pathways and Hope Scores

	<b>PRE-SURVEY RESULTS (April 2016)</b>					<b>POST-SURVEY RESULTS (June 2016)</b>						
<b>Scores</b>	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation	Difference in Mean	Effectiveness of Learning Outcomes
Agency <sup>1</sup>	7	19	26	22.86	3.132	6	17	29	24.83	4.792	1.97	increase
Pathways <sup>2</sup>	7	21	30	25.86	3.078	6	21	29	24.83	3.061	-1.03	decrease
Hope <sup>3</sup>	7	40	56	48.71	6.13	6	38	56	49.67	6.919	0.96	increase

<sup>1</sup> Agency is calculated by adding the scores from items 2, 9, 10 and 12. Scores range from 4 to 32. Higher scores reflect higher agency.

<sup>2</sup> Pathways is calculated by adding the scores from items 1, 4, 6 and 8. Higher scores reflect higher pathways thinking.

<sup>3</sup> Hope is calculated by adding Agency and Pathways scores. Scores of 40-48 are hopeful, 48-56 moderately hopeful, 56+ high hope.

*Observations*

Based on notes from the program staff, they observed that throughout the course of the seven-week program there was a change in most of the girls' attitudes in general. During the first week, as expected, the girls were very shy and reluctant to open up to one another and the facilitators. Many appeared to be introverted and withdrawn; they did not offer up a lot of details about their situations. By the fifth or sixth week, the girls began opening up, but unfortunately it was toward the end of the program. Around the same time, there was a noticeable difference in most of the girls' attitudes. Many were outwardly open about being grateful to be there, they shared more details of their experiences, they offered more suggestions and ideas to the group and they generally participated more.

From the beginning to the end there was an observable change in the participants' behaviors and they seemed generally more positive and hopeful. Those who were more extroverted showed their personality more, but even those who were more quiet and reserved showed a happier and more comfortable/relaxed disposition than at the beginning of the program. Though they were very unsure about the program at the beginning, all of the girls had very positive comments about the success of the program and how much it helped them. In addition to filling out the Resiliency Quiz, Dees asked the girls to write a comment about their thoughts after completing this program. Some of the comments they wrote on the Resiliency Quiz included:

“I learned that boundaries are really important and help create healthy relationships with others.”

“Coming to Healing Hearts Ranch has made me realize that being congruent is a lot healthier and better on my emotions and relationships.”

“You think you know who you are until you come to Healing Hearts Ranch, then the horses teach you who you really are.”

“Coming to Healing Hearts Ranch helped me learn how to control my emotions and be true to myself.”

Aside from the changes in attitude and behavior, reports from the program staff and facilitators stated it was interesting to watch the interactions the girls had with the horses. Working with the horses brought a whole new level of challenges that I do not think the girls were expecting. At first, those who had never been around horses were timid, but by the end, all of the girls greeted the lessons with the horses as a special treat and pushed through any challenges head on with excitement. Program staff and facilitators noted that even something as simple as grooming a horse for half an hour made the girls more relaxed and calm. This program gave them a safe space away from the chaos of their school and home lives to relax and let their guards down and to learn better ways to cope with trauma, relationships and emotions.

### *Recommendations*

The most important recommendation for the Hope with Horses program is to lengthen it. The seven weeks was too short of a time period and did not give the girls enough time to really open up, trust each other or the facilitators and begin to get into more detail of the problems they faced. I would suggest lengthening the program to 10 or 12 week long sessions to provide ample time to allow them to get to know one another

and open up more quickly so as to get to the main problems they face. Alternatively, there is also a chance that meeting twice weekly for five to seven weeks would also produce the desired effects.

The group size of six to eight participants seemed to be a great size for this program and I recommend keeping it the same. This group size felt personal without being too small, but not too large to where the girls felt afraid to share their thoughts, feelings and experiences. To offset the initial uncomfortable feelings that come with interacting with adults they did not know, it was a great idea to include young adult staff and volunteers to contribute to the group and share their own experiences to make it a more comfortable environment by taking some of the pressure off of each of the girls to share.

More one-on-one time with the horses would also benefit the girls. If this program was expanded to cover ten or twelve weeks, there is a possibility of freeing up some time for the girls to individually go work with Dees and one of the horses doing some activities while the rest of the group is working on something else. Each girl would get the opportunity to do a lesson with Dees and a horse as it could switch off each week whose turn it is. The rest of the group would be going over a certain lesson which also pertains to what is going on with the individual and the horse so neither party misses out on any portion of a lesson. More one-on-one time with a horse would allow the girls to become more comfortable in their ability to work safely with a large animal and increase their self-confidence which could possibly lead to them opening up more quickly to the whole group.

While we did provide the girls with handouts for each of the lessons, including activities or a workbook of some sort to practice the skills at home could be useful. It would be important to continue to do a check-in during each week at the beginning and the end of the session. The check-in at the beginning of the session gives the girls an opportunity to talk about how they felt last week's session went, whether or not they began implementing the new skills at school, at home or in their various relationships or friendships and to express any concerns or ask any questions about last week's lesson. The check-in at the end was useful for wrapping up the afternoon, clarifying the session's activities, and answering any questions the girls may have.

With appropriate time and resources, I would also like to see a community portion of this program. Getting more of the community involved in the fight against suicide and self-harm amongst youth would strengthen the community and help to lower the rates of suicide and self-harm for the youth. Perhaps this program could lead to a community outreach event, get the girls involved in volunteering, or perhaps introduce them to a horseback riding program or another sport or extracurricular if they are not involved in one already. It is important that the impact of this program not stop when the girls are done with the program sessions. By adding a community component, we could raise more awareness around the seriousness of suicide and self-harm amongst Thurston County youth and create a broader impact.

## CHAPTER 4: OPERATION T.H.R.I.V.E. WARRIOR HORSEMANSHIP

### *Background*

Operation T.H.R.I.V.E. began as an idea from one of Dees's staff members, Joe Green, who is a regular volunteer at Healing Hearts Ranch and assists with several HeartStrides programs taking place at the ranch. Green, an Army veteran, thought a program for this population would be beneficial, especially considering the ranch's proximity to Joint Base Lewis McChord (an Army and Air Force installation). This program was designed to help veterans, military personnel and first responders get an introduction to basic horsemanship, work with their own strengths and challenges, and learn methods to reduce stress.

As HeartStrides began to expand their programs to cater to new demographics, it seemed natural that a program for veterans, active duty military personnel and first responders would come next. One of Dees's staff members and regular volunteer at the ranch, Joe Green, began to play with the idea of a program that caters specifically to the veteran community. Green, a retired Army Sergeant First Class, thought a program for this specific population would be highly beneficial to the community, especially given the ranch's proximity to Joint Base Lewis McChord (an Army and Air Force installation around Tacoma, WA), by providing this population with a program that brought people together and focused on healing and safety. Green, himself, had already witnessed and felt the calming and healing effects of equine-assisted therapies after completing some

lessons with Dees and knew working with horses could help other veterans, too.

With Green's assistance and experience with veterans, Dees created a two-and-a-half-day clinic for veterans, active duty service members and first responders, called Operation T.H.R.I.V.E. Warrior Horsemanship. The program was centered on the idea of teaching community members to "thrive" by having balance in their lives, feeling safe and comfortable and knowing they have a support system around them. The program was developed around the principles of Teaching, Horsemanship, Resiliency, Integrity, Virtue and Empowerment and the purpose was to bring this population together and to facilitate physical and emotional healing in a comfortable setting. Operation T.H.R.I.V.E. is one way HeartStrides could give back to those who served our country and now find themselves not fitting back into civilian life or who need help adjusting after returning from a battle zone, or for those who just wanted to try something new. The pilot program took place in April of 2016 and was a huge success. With such great success during the pilot, Dees and the HeartStrides staff and volunteers began to plan for the first weekend clinic. The first Operation T.H.R.I.V.E. Warrior Horsemanship clinic was officially launched the weekend of September 16<sup>th</sup>, 2016 and more two weekend clinics are planned for August 2017.

The clinic was designed for all skill levels, including those who had never been around horses before. While this clinic was not therapy-intensive, it was geared toward creating a safe environment for all, including those who suffered from anxiety, depression and PTSD and for those who did not suffer from any mental health issues. While the clinic can be accommodating for those with physical disabilities or those with

more severe mental health problems, HeartStrides hippotherapy (horseback riding as a therapeutic or rehabilitative treatment to improve strength, coordination and balance) program is much more suited to that population, and the participants in the September clinic did not fall under this category. The goal for the weekend long clinic was to provide the participants with a calm environment that was conducive to learning about horsemanship, challenging themselves and relaxing. The participants were paired with a horse and learned the basic skills of handling, interacting and communicating with horses. Participants also used their own strengths and shortcomings to build trust and cooperation with their horse partner and as the partnership developed, moved onto tasks where they had to work together to accomplish goals based on mutual respect. Additionally, the clinic also offered activities where the participants learned methods to reduce stress for both them and the horse.

### *Lesson Plans*

The Operation T.H.R.I.V.E. clinic started on Friday evening and concluded Sunday afternoon. On Friday evening, participants came together to share a meal and socialize. This gave time for the participants to get to know one another and become comfortable around the barn and arena. After the meal, the participants, volunteers and staff watched the horses interact with each other in a herd. During the herd observation, the participants got a lesson on horse body language and communication. On Saturday, the participants came back to the ranch to learn about safety, horsemanship, and



partnership with their horse. On Sunday morning, the participants learned about grooming, tack and riding equipment. By the afternoon, they learned about horse and rider movements and the basic riding skills of stopping and steering.

The goals of the program were to introduce the participants to basic horsemanship, learn how horses interact with each other and with humans, learn about body language, and have an opportunity to meet other individuals who are also former or current military personnel and understand the similar struggles of being a part of this population and trying to fit into the civilian world. Each lesson focused on a different aspect of horsemanship, while also allowing participants to examine their body language, how they interact with others and to develop new skills for handling their stress or anxiety.

#### *Herd behavior and body language*

The clinic started with an introduction to herd behavior and additional time was spent explaining the connection between horse herds and groups of humans. A group of horses were brought into the arena for the participants to view safely from the mounting ramp on the side of the arena. Dees defined a herd as a group of horses (as little as two to as many as twenty or more) that instinctively live together. Living in a herd provides horses safety and companionship, which is not unlike the benefits humans have when living together or in close proximity to one another.

After the introduction, the participants observed the herd for various behaviors. Dees specifically chose certain horses to participate in the herd demonstration. For

example, the horses Dees often includes are Remy, Joey, Blitz, Joy, and Molly. Remy is the alpha mare, Joey has a very out-going personality, Blitz is shy and tries to stay out of the way, Joy likes attention and is often playful, and Molly is the youngest horse and the one at the bottom of the social hierarchy of the herd.

The program has the participants to take a close look at the behaviors each horse displayed. Dees used the herd observation to begin a discussion with participants about the importance of communicating with others and of understanding the subtleties of body language. Throughout the observation, Dees manipulated the situation in the arena by creating a “frightening” situation where the horses encounter plastic bags or other loud objects they are not as familiar with. Then she created a “calm” situation where she spoke quietly, there were no new objects in the arena and everything appeared calm. The participants then had the opportunity to observe the behavior of a frightened horse and a relaxed horse. She discussed the different traits associated with such behaviors. A frightened horse will often elevate their head, put back their ears, stiffen their tail and hold their breath while a relaxed horse will often lower their head, relax their ears, lick their lips, chew, drop their tail and take a deep sigh (Dees 2016b).

After participants observed the behavior in a herd setting, Dees (2016b) further explained how body language allows horses to communicate to one another, to humans and how important body language is for humans communicating with each other. Reading a horse’s body language is paramount to safety. Between humans, body language is also a way to understand a situation and peoples’ emotions.

Within the lesson on herd behavior and body language, Dees introduced a lesson on respecting, sharing and claiming space while interacting with others. The basis of the lesson was the understanding that to horses, humans are predatory animals. Dees (2016b) emphasized the need to understand that aspect of the relationship and how it relates to human interactions. When humans approach someone in a predatory manner, often there are misunderstandings, defensiveness, and a need to retreat. Allan Hamilton (2011) described this best when he stated that horses strive to include humans, as predators, in a communal context and that they work constantly to include humans in their daily working and emotional lives. In essence, horses live in the moment and are not capable of lying, cheating or deceit. When humans are with horses, there is no opportunity to be fake; horses are authentic and expect nothing different from their human herd members (Hamilton, 2011). The participants were asked to consider this and to think about what their lives would be like if they lived authentically and did not expect anything different from the people they encountered on a daily basis. Many of the participants commented on the fact that they would no longer have to constantly worry if they were being lied to or have thoughts in the back of their minds about people treating them badly or unfairly. Less energy would be wasted on treating others badly and more energy and effort could be put into working together with mutual respect for one another.

In the herd, the social structure centers around respect, sharing, and claiming space. Some of the worst habits humans possess are rushing, crowding and micro-managing. Moving quickly and rushing are seen as predatory actions to horses, and Dees quickly related these traits to the responses people may have in situations when they are

unsure of how to approach a situation (Dees, 2016b). The participants were given the opportunity to link these traits to issues in their daily lives with family members or coworkers and begin to understand how to relate these lessons to human interaction. To effectively communicate with one another, there has to be mutual respect, sharing space to interact and claiming the space when it is your turn to speak and get your point across.

### *Catching and haltering*

The lesson for catching and haltering a horse began on Saturday morning once the participants arrived. One of the staff members gave a brief introduction to the two types of halters, rope halter and flat halter, and an explanation of where the halter properly sits on a horse's face. Then the group discussed catching a horse. First and foremost, it was imperative to remind everyone that a horse's eyes are placed on the sides of their heads and they cannot see directly in front of them. Instead of approaching a horse from the front, participants were instructed to approach to the side and look for the body language that implies permission to enter the horse's space. Dees instructed the participants to wait and see if the horse is looking at them and if they are, that is their permission to continue forward. If the horse looked away or started to look away, the participants lost that permission. Dees coached the participants further by adding that if their horse starts to look away then it is time to stop, rock back, breathe and stand still. Once the horse looks back at the participant, they were instructed to move forward slowly at an angle to their shoulder.

Catching a horse in a field, reading body language and knowing how to properly approach them was a huge lesson in patience and understanding for the participants. On the surface, this was a lesson in basic horsemanship, but Dees included it to show participants that this type of interaction also pertains to interacting with other people. She gave an example of approaching others when you wish to engage in conversation. You wouldn't go rushing up to someone excitedly or angry because you may frighten them off. To get the best response, if you approach someone in a calm manner, you would generally find them easy to talk to and already engaged. The participants have to approach others often either on the job or in their personal lives. Catching a horse in the field was used to symbolize approaching others in a non-predatory nature so as to get the other person's full attention and have both parties respect each other's space.

### *Leading*

One of the most important aspects of horsemanship is being aware that pressure and release of pressure make for the best relationship between horse and rider. During the lesson on leading, participants were instructed not to pull a horse forward and to instead use their body language to move a horse forward with them. By positioning themselves at their horse's shoulder, they created the pressure needed for a horse to move forward with them. Instead of dragging the horse forward, participants used pressure and release tactics to ensure the horse is moving with them creating a partnership based on mutual respect (Dees 2016b).

Once the participants mastered the art of leading safely forward, they were then shown a demonstration on how to ask the horse to slow or stop. Dees showed the participants how to use their bodies to prepare the horse to slow or stop. The participants were instructed to stop using their own body by dropping their hips (Dees 2016b). Participants also received guidance for turning their horse and additional safety information in case a horse barges into their personal space, tries to pull the lead rope from them, rears or bolts off.

### *Safe horsemanship*

Since much of the premise of the clinic is an introduction to basic horsemanship, Dees includes an abundance of information on safe horsemanship throughout the weekend. Some basic safety rules at Healing Hearts Ranch include:

- Do not micro-manage or crowd a horse's head
- Always, always, always use a quick release knot when tying and ask if you do not know how to tie a quick release knot
- When approaching a horse, announce yourself firmly, but don't be loud and threatening
- Move slowly and deliberately with confidence
- Wear appropriate footwear
- Always wear a helmet when riding
- Be aware of their size and the fact they have four legs (they need a lot of space when turning)

- Know how to stay in the safety zone at the horse's shoulder
- Turn the horse to face you when turning them loose in a field or stall
- When passing by other horses when you are leading, always pass person to person, not horse to horse
- Never be afraid to ask for help, get away from a horse, let go of a rope or get down from the saddle – it is always better to be safe
- Take suggestions in the moment

### *Grooming*

Throughout the weekend, the participants spent a large chunk of their time grooming the horses as a way for them to connect to their horse partners and take a few moments to relax. Participants were first given a brief introduction to the various grooming tools including the name and what it is used for (e.g. a curry comb is used to loosen dirt and hair). After being introduced to the grooming tools, the participants were given a lesson on the importance of grooming which include improved health of the skin and coat, dispersing of skin oils, cleans the horse so chaffing in sensitive areas does not occur, and it also gives the person a chance to check for cuts, heat, or swelling which could indicate an injury. Grooming was also emphasized as an activity to form and maintain a relationship between the horse and handler which can carry over to other handling duties and riding (Dees 2016b).

While grooming is essential to a horse's well-being, the program teaches the importance of grooming as part of the healing process for humans. When the participants

were engaged in a meditational grooming exercise, they were focusing on relaxation, focused attention on their horse and their own body, and a heartfelt connection to their equine partner. Dees is not the only advocate for grooming as an equine-assisted learning activity. Leigh Shambo, MSW, LMHC, also insists that bonding between a horse and human promotes limbic healing. In her book, *The Listening Heart*, Shambo (2013) discusses in great detail the use of horses in healing a human's limbic system which is the center that controls emotions and memories, but also includes regions that can detect fear and distinguish sensory information. She advocates that the restructuring of the human's limbic system must come from experiences that specifically engage the limbic system of the brain which is the brain's mammalian center. This is done when participants establish trusting relationships and are free to engage in activities that allow them to build a partnership (Shambo 2013). According to Shambo (2013):

The goal is for the person and horse to: A) create a limbic bond or connection; becoming curious about and engaged by each other, B) build mutual understanding and shared communication through challenges, and C) demonstrate a smooth partnership through an attached relationship. In many cases, there is evidence that the bond is mutual and the horse is truly engaged. Horses form strong and lasting friendships much the way people do—through invisible chemistry of emotional resonance. (P. 14)

The program employs the use of meditation grooming exercises as just one example of the equine-assisted learning activities used for some of the participants. It works particularly well for those who have suffered any sort of traumatic experience as it begins to reset the limbic pathways so the participants can establish new connections with their family and friends, and even co-workers (Dees 2016b). Given that many of the participants of this program have seen combat or experienced training that promotes a



heightened sense of self-preservation, meditational grooming can help reset their limbic pathways to promote the building of healthy relationships.

### *Horse movement and balance*

Clinic participants were given a brief overview of horse movement and balance before being allowed to do a short trail ride. To begin, Dees and her staff and volunteers explained and then demonstrated three basic horse gaits which include the walk, trot and canter. Once the participants are given the explanation and a quick demonstration of the three gaits, they are then given the opportunity to pair up with another participant to form groups of two. The pairs are asked to work together to “be” the horse’s four legs and to practice the walk, trot and canter movements. Both participants stood in a line with one in front of the other. The person in the front acted as the horse’s front legs, and the person in the back acted as the horse’s hind legs. This activity not only allowed them, to understand movement, but worked as a team building exercise where the participants learned to work together.

### *Learning to ride*

On Sunday morning, before allowing the participants to mount and ride their horse, Dees and her staff and volunteers gave some instruction on the basics of horseback riding and a few demonstrations to show how to accurately cue a horse when riding. This portion of the program was fairly brief as the focus was not on learning to ride a horse, but this lesson covered leg cues and rein aids as ways to steer their horse in the direction

they were trying to go. Before riding, the participants took part in another activity that would allow them to understand riding a horse from the horse's perspective. Dees sat atop a saddle mount to simulate being on a horse's back and the participants took turns acting as the horse by sitting in front of Kristy with the bridle in their hands to simulate the horse's head. Dees replicated a rider's movement so the participant can feel what it is like for the horse to have their mouth tugged on with the reins. She showed participants both the wrong way to utilize reins and the correct way so they are aware of how it feels for the horse (Dees 2016b). By mid-morning, the participants mounted their equine partner and finished the day with a trail ride.

### *Program Evaluation*

#### *Analysis*

To evaluate the Operation THRIVE Warrior Horsemanship clinic that took place in September of 2016, Dees designed and implemented a short survey (see Appendix C). This survey was used to gauge any changes in their level of stress before and after the clinic and to get general feedback about the clinic, though it was only given at the conclusion of the clinic weekend. The survey mostly consisted of questions regarding the participants' expectations of the clinic, what they learned, how they may apply their new skills to their daily life, what they favorite and least favorite activity was, and if there were any suggestions to improve the clinic.

For the Likert-type scale questions regarding their level of stress before and after the clinic, I had intended on analyzing the pre- and post-clinic answers using chi-square, however, the N size (11 participants) was not large enough for this analysis to show whether or not there was a statistical significance and the results would not be reliable. I chose to create a chart that compared the difference in the means (see Table 4) by indicating whether or not there was an increase or a decrease in the means between the pre- and post-clinic answers about the participants' stress levels. Though this analysis does not show statistical significance, it provides insight into the impact the clinic had on the participants' ability to cope with stress.

The pre- to post-clinic scores indicated there was an increase in the mean scores for the participants' ability to cope with their stress. The mean score increased by 2.36 points from 5.27 to 7.64, where 10 was the highest number and indicated they felt they had a very strong ability to cope with their stress. In this situation, the increase could indicate some level of effectiveness of the clinic in assisting the participants with new skills and exercises to better cope with their stress.

Table 4. Stress Outcomes

	<b>BEFORE the clinic</b>					<b>AFTER the clinic</b>						
Question	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation	Difference in Mean	Effectiveness of Learning Outcomes
Rate your ability to cope with stress <sup>1</sup>	11	1	8	5.27	2.453	11	5	10	7.64	1.502	2.63	increase

<sup>1</sup> “Rate your ability to cope with stress” is based on a 10-point Likert scale with 10 “very strong ability” and 1 “very little ability”

To analyze the qualitative portion of the survey, I created an infographic (see Figure 2) that outlines the qualitative questions asked, and simplifies the responses into categories of how the participants responded. Each question has its own box on the infographic and the responses for each question are broken down into categories and how many participants responded a certain way. When asked about their expectations for the clinic, a majority (66%) responded that they had expected to learn how to care for and understand horses. All the participants reported learning new skills during the clinic and 50% of the comments mentioned the new skills had more to do with handling and caring for horses. When asked if they would apply their new skills to their daily lives, all of the participants stated they would, and 7 out of the 12 comments mentioned using their new skills to calm down, breathe, be patient and being aware of others' emotions during stressful situations. Along with these comments, 7 out of 10 comments mentioned approaching stressful situations differently than before by coming into the situation calmly and taking more time to assess the situation they find themselves in.

When asked what was the most unexpected thing they learned during the clinic, participants stated three main surprises which included learning how a horse sees and how their brains work, how much horses respond to body language and participants were also surprised by how calming it was to work with horses.

When discussing their favorite activity, the majority of the participants enjoyed the trail ride at the end of the clinic and the second favorite activity was grooming the horses. The least favorite activities mentioned were learning about tack and how to tack

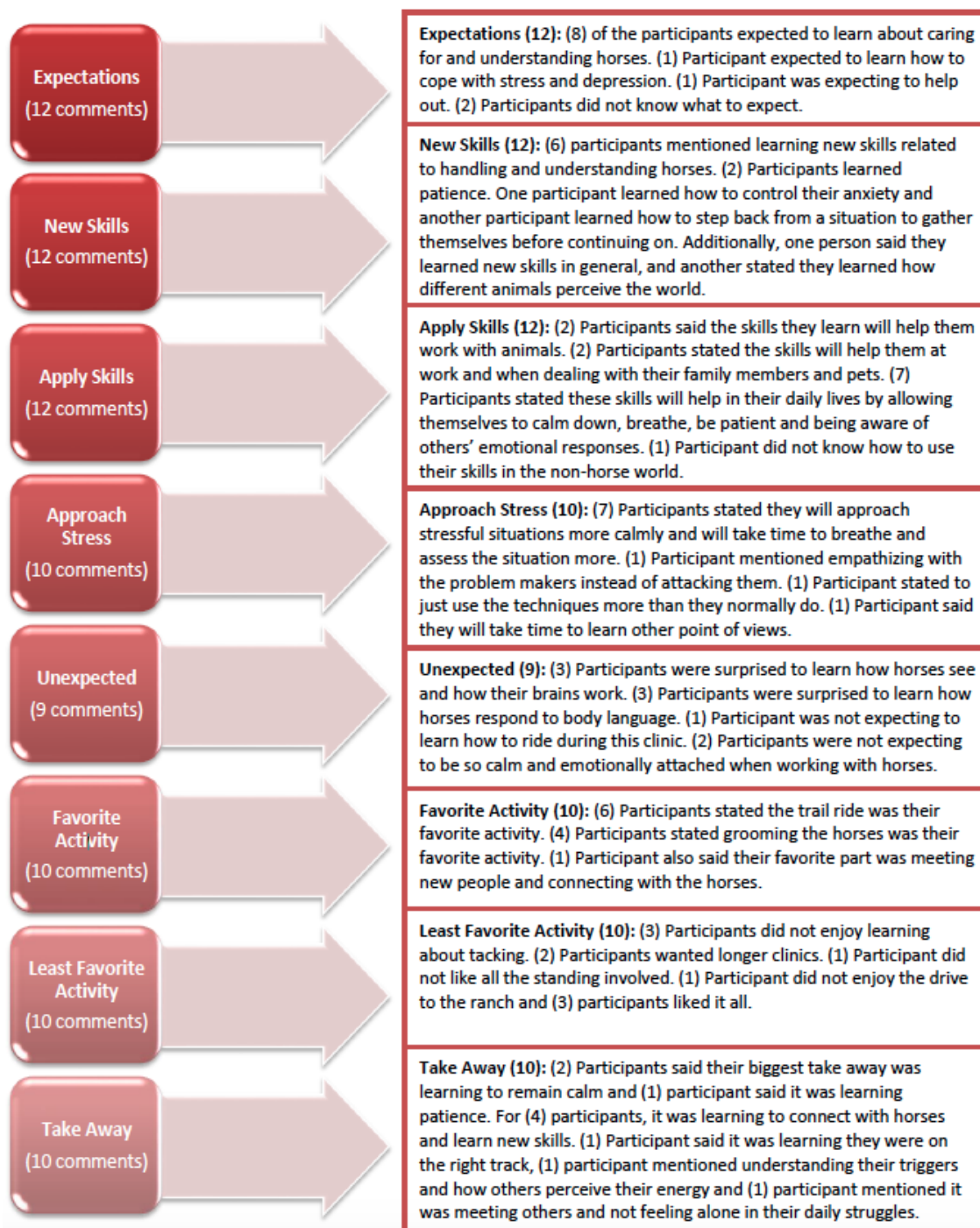
up a horse to go riding, the standing involved (it caused pain and stiffness from injuries), and the drive out to the ranch.

The most important lessons for the participants were learning to remain calm and being patient with others. Others also mentioned understanding their triggers and how their energy is perceived by others, and another enjoyed meeting other veterans and knowing they are not alone in their daily struggles.

The last question on the survey asked participants if they had any suggestions for the HeartStrides staff about ways to improve the clinic for the future. Some of the feedback included adjusting the hours of the clinic and offering more chances to sit, as they reminded us there are many who have injuries that are not always visible. A few participants suggested including some additional ice breakers at the beginning so the participants can get to know one another and have a chance to open up and interact more. Participants also suggested more training for the volunteers because there was some miscommunication that made it confusing when working with the horses and it would have easily been avoided had the volunteers all understood the order of events and the tasks. Some other suggestions included more advertising, allowing more time for riding and grooming, connecting better with the Veterans Affairs department near the ranch and with Joint Base Lewis-McChord to help spread the word, and to have a smaller class size.

Figure 2. Operation THRIVE Comments

## Fall 2016 Operation THRIVE Warrior Horsemanship



### *Observations*

The clinic was well received by the participants. Program staff and facilitators noted that it was exciting to watch the participants open up to one another, work on team activities together and enjoy the time they spent with the horses. This weekend long clinic offered them some time away from everyday stressors and allowed them some time to be with other warriors who have similar experiences to their own.

The clinic was an effective introduction to horsemanship, but not enough emphasis was put on stress reduction, dealing with emotions, and learning new ways to handle triggers or deal with past trauma. The purpose of the clinic was to gather warriors together, meet new people, form relationships, and learn about horses, but the underlying purpose was to give the participants an opportunity to see working with horses as an alternative to traditional therapy. From this clinic, there was a greater interest in the participants continuing on at Healing Hearts Ranch and taking part in the other opportunities in either more advanced horsemanship classes, hippotherapy (therapeutic horseback riding lessons that strengthen muscles and improve balance and coordination) lessons, and volunteer opportunities.

### *Recommendations*

One of the most important recommendations for future clinics is to offer longer and shorter clinics so participants can choose which weekend hours work best for their physical condition. For example, some of the weekend clinics could include only morning or only afternoon sessions instead of lasting an entire day. Another option to



combat some of the issues with working with participants with physical injuries would be to offer more opportunities to sit during lessons or offer more breaks where participants can sit and relax for a few minutes throughout the day.

Another important recommendation would be to limit the clinic size to six to eight participants. While it was exciting to have the eleven participants, it was difficult to gather everyone's attention, make adequate room in the arena, and provide enough volunteers needed to help each participant one-on-one. For future clinics, having a smaller clinic size would allow more one-on-one interaction, more focused lessons and would be much easier to plan for the smaller number of volunteers needed to assist each participant.

Some important recommendations for dealing with volunteers would include having a volunteer training prior to the clinic that specifically trains the volunteers on dealing with this specific population. Many of the volunteers at Healing Hearts Ranch are used to assisting younger children and teenagers so they were more hands on with the warriors than they needed to be. Additionally, for future clinics, it would be important to have a clear agenda typed out and given to all of the volunteers and staff members and have a designated time before the clinic began to go over the agenda and plan for the day. Some of the volunteers arrived late and were not able to ask questions or verify the plan for the day. The volunteers who did not know what the day's events were gave contradicting information to the participants and created unnecessary chaos.

While this clinic is offered as a horsemanship clinic, I think future clinics can have more of an emphasis on coping with stress, anxiety, PTSD, etc. There were

definitely parts of the lessons in this clinic that focused on those things, but this population could benefit from additional resources that they may not be getting from the Veterans Affairs Department, their friends and family, etc. Perhaps there can be two parts to this clinic where one portion focuses on the horsemanship aspect and the other portion focuses on more of the skills for dealing with stress. The participants in this clinic enjoyed learning about horsemanship skills and it was clear they learned new ways to cope with stressors, but more could be added to future clinics. If breaking the clinics up this way wouldn't be plausible with the limited amount of time, there could be opportunity—with appropriate funding—to create either an extended clinic that includes both pieces or two separate clinics where one is focused on learning horsemanship as an introduction and for fun and the other clinic is focused more on using horses as an alternative form of therapy.

Since so many of the participants in this clinic enjoyed grooming and riding the horses, in future clinics perhaps incorporating more of these opportunities would be beneficial for the participants. Grooming really helped the participants form a bond with the horses and they felt very relaxed and peaceful. Additional opportunities for grooming would really help the participants relax and could perhaps break down some barriers and allow them to open up to others in the group more. While riding was not a main focus of the clinic, the participants really enjoyed their trail ride in the woods. It was a great end to the clinic and perhaps could be extended from fifteen minutes to thirty minutes to give them more time in the saddle and enjoying nature. Because the participants enjoyed riding so much, it would be important to offer future opportunities for riding by

introducing them to the hippotherapy programs at Healing Hearts Ranch or having them sign up for riding lessons.

The last recommendation I have for future clinics was brought about by discussing this program with some of the female participants, Kristy Dees and the other HeartStrides staff and other female veterans I know. While this program was co-ed and was a huge success, I see a need to create some clinics that are solely dedicated to female veterans, active duty and reserve members. In this clinic, it was noticeable that the males spoke mostly with the other males and the females stuck more closely to themselves. While they did all open up about their experiences, it was on a different level than it would be if it were all males or all females together. The males were much more outspoken throughout the weekend and the females tended to keep more to themselves and not be as open about their experiences or problems. Sometimes having co-ed groups of this nature do not allow the participants to engage fully.

Additionally, Luxton, Skopp and Maguen (2010) found that there were differences in frequencies of PTSD and depression between males and females who came from back from war in the past couple of decades. They found that women came back more often than men with PTSD or depression like symptoms. Much of the research done previously on veterans is biased toward males and does not include an accurate look at the effects of equine-therapy on females. Women are now allowed to participate in various career paths in the military branches so they too come back from war with conditions such as PTSD. It is not just a condition that males suffer from, so the data needs to reflect the views and experiences of females. The female participants and other

female service members I have spoken to also stated they would feel more comfortable opening up to other females instead of in a co-ed situation. There are not a lot of resources specifically for female veterans and service members, so a clinic such as this one dedicated to their recovery would be well received by the community and service members.

## CHAPTER 5: IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Chapter 3 and 4 clearly outlined the adaptability of equine-assisted learning to appeal to and benefit both at-risk teen girls and veterans and active duty military personnel. These two populations are different in terms of age, life experience, backgrounds, education, etc., yet both groups showed positive changes after completing their programs. One of the greatest benefits of equine-assisted learning is how adaptable it is and how useful the lessons can be to a variety of populations, regardless of the differences in their backgrounds or characteristics. Equine-assisted learning activities and programs can be altered to fit any group of people and assist a variety of populations in facing and overcoming their challenges.

If the programs HeartStrides provided to teen girls and to veterans proved to be effective and assisted the participants with making positive life choices in the future, there is a good chance a similar program could be offered to another special population who would highly benefit from these lessons. There is a great need to offer additional support to those reintegrating into the community upon release from jail or prison. While we often forget about this particular population, it is vital to the community as a whole to ensure their successful reentry so as to create a more stable and thriving community. In my work with this population, I often hear excuses from other community members that the currently and formerly incarcerated do not deserve help. What they do not realize is that by helping this population succeed, they are working to help the whole community and everyone is benefitting from helping the formerly incarcerated succeed. By helping

this population, it creates stronger ties and allows for more opportunities for this population to become “upstanding citizens” who pay taxes, are employed, do not commit more crimes, etc. In the future, an equine-assisted learning program catered specifically for the formerly incarcerated population would be an important next step for HeartStrides and the surrounding community.

### *Implications of this Research for Reentry*

In the United States, citizens generally seem to have an “out of sight, out of mind” mentality about those labeled as criminals or delinquents. The public largely forgets about them once they are arrested and it seems there is very little thought given to the fact hundreds of thousands of people are released from jail or prison every year (National Institute of Justice 2015). Reintegration is the process of ex-offenders being released back to communities across the country. Reentry, specifically, refers to the issues the ex-offenders face and the promotion of programs that lead to effective reintegration for this specific population (National Crime Prevention Council, 2017). By and large, most states have their own reentry programs set up to assist ex-offenders upon their release. The Department of Corrections, or similar state, county or city-run department, are dedicated state entities that control large pools of money set aside to assist with reentry efforts. There are also non-profit organizations and faith-based communities that participate in, fund or create reentry programs for ex-offenders. Most ex-offenders are pushed toward

state-sanctioned reentry programs, but non-profit organizations can offer a great alternative (Petersilia 2004).

### *Barriers to successful reentry*

Those who are reentering their communities face several barriers including access to safe and affordable housing, viable employment, accessible transportation, health care, and education. Many also struggle with the bureaucracy of the criminal justice system and working through its many obstacles to access the treatment or resources that will allow them to get custody of their children back (Austin 2001; Garland, Wodahl and Mayfield 2010; Shinkfield and Graffam 2009; Zajac, Hutchison, and Meyer 2014). Another issue that hinders the reentry experience is the fact that many people who are released—out of jails in particular—do not have any form of identification. Lacking current identification means that they are barred from accessing a number of programs that may (or may not) be useful to them as they are released. This delays finding and securing appropriate housing and employment and makes it difficult for this population to reintegrate smoothly (Garland, Wodahl and Mayfield 2010).

Many of the obstacles they face could be avoided if they had proper access to much needed resources. Prisons and jails are ill-equipped to help offenders handle the transition from incarceration to the community. With limited access to help, more than two thirds of released prisoners in the United States are rearrested within three years (Caporizzo 2011; National Institute of Justice 2014). The hype around reentry has not

been enough to fuel the drive to find solutions to curb recidivism and to keep people out of prisons and jails.

*Flying changes: an alternative reentry model for Thurston County, WA*

From my internship at HeartStrides Therapeutic Riding and Horsemanship of Olympia, I see potential for an alternative reentry treatment that utilizes equine-assisted learning activities. During my internship, I watched equine-assisted learning activities and therapeutic riding have profound effects on both children and adults who have had traumatic experiences or difficult lives. While HeartStrides does not specifically offer a program for current or former inmates, it is entirely possible to develop a program to be used for this purpose (Dees 2016a).

In other states, like Colorado and Kentucky, there are programs that already exist that connect horses and inmates. Colorado's program, Wild Horse Inmate Program (WHIP), partners Bureau of Land Management (BLM) wild horses and donkeys with inmates. While I recognize this program is associated with the state and not a non-profit organization, the model of partnering horses and ex-offenders together for rehabilitation shows can be done without a state department or agency being involved. The horses and donkeys receive personal and extensive training by the inmates as part of an inmate rehabilitative program. In addition to training services, the inmates feed and care for the animals. Once the horses and donkeys are trained, WHIP offers them to people who do not have the experience, time or facilities to train their own. The inmates gain marketable work experience and other valuable skills by partnering with these animals (U.S.



Department of the Interior BLM 2016). Lexington, Kentucky is also home to a similar program called the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation (TRF) Second Chances Program. The Second Chances Program allows inmates to build life skills while in a vocational training program. The inmates provide care for the retired racehorses on the farm after being put through a rigorous training program that includes learning horse anatomy, caring for injuries, equine nutrition and other important aspects of health care. Graduates of the program are given a certification based on the level of skill they mastered. Once released from prison, the graduates of the Second Chances Program have gone onto careers as farriers and vet assistants. Not only did inmates learn important work skills, but they also gained confidence and a sense of empathy. Studies that were conducted show a reduction in recidivism rates at facilities that host this program (Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation 2016). While both programs are great examples of what is currently being done with horses and inmates, TRF Second Chances Program is important to look at as an example of a program being run by a non-profit organization.

These programs, and others like it, concentrate on current inmates and rehabilitation while incarcerated. They do not do follow ups with prior clients once they are released nor do they work with the formerly incarcerated. While it is extremely important to work with current inmates to provide them skills and experiences during the time they are incarcerated, these organizations are missing a chance to connect with former inmates as they reintegrate back into society. It is necessary to develop a program that can catch former inmates as they leave institutional facilities that is an alternative to traditional reentry programs.

An alternative reentry program that provides access to all needed services and focuses on learning, skills development, and gaining confidence with horses may be best suited for the more rural areas of Thurston County (and potentially other rural areas of Washington state). Participants who have an interest in learning with horses would attend a six-month long equine-assisted learning course. The courses would be designed to teach participants about horse anatomy, how to care for injuries, equine nutrition, grooming, tack, and basic horsemanship to start out. Once the basics were understood, participants would move into equine-assisted learning activities that focus on the development of life skills for educational, professional and personal goals (PATH International 2016). Sections of the course would include herd behavior, respect, sharing and claiming space (horse body language and how it relates to humans), catching, haltering and leading, authentic connections, relaxation, focused attention, being heartfelt, and lessons on trust and creating a bond. There would also be an emphasis on the lessons that focus on being authentic, knowing your triggers, facing life challenges (having a reaction versus making a response), speaking to be known and listening out of curiosity, and self-control. Equine-assisted learning activities provide a unique opportunity for the participants to learn about themselves while partnering with horses (Dees 2016a).

Based off studies such as those by Gunnison and Helfgott (2011), Garland et al (2010, 2014), Petersilia et al (2004), and Travis et al (2001), it is clear that most of this population needs help with the basics such as employment, housing, transportation and medical needs. The program I see developing at HeartStrides would have staff working with clients and other community organizations to get them into stable housing as soon as

possible. HeartStrides would also develop connections with local food pantries and other organizations to assist them with food for the first couple of weeks. The next step would be to work on finding steady employment and transportation to get to and from work. From here, the clients would be offered parenting classes, assistance with enrolling in school, vocational/skills courses, counseling if they choose, medical treatment and equine-assisted learning courses. While the organization may not necessarily provide each and every service for the program, the staff and volunteers would be well connected with other community organizations and members to get the items or programs needed for the former inmates.

Most importantly, this program would emphasize the voice of the formerly incarcerated. When they first come to HeartStrides they would sit down with a staff member or volunteer to create a list of their short term and long term goals and their immediate and long term needs. A file would be created for each individual that details their goals, everyday needs, medical needs, family history, and any other pertinent information. The files would be used by staff and volunteers to best assist each client while also allowing each client to articulate what they see as being their most important needs and goals. Often times it feels as though the voices of these people are drowned out by what service providers think they need, and the current or former inmates never have a chance to express their own feelings, desires, or needs. By giving them back their own voice and human agency, HeartStrides staff would assist them in making their own choices and reintegrating into society in ways that make them feel in control and successful.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

This project offered a detailed analysis of the Hope with Horses and Operation T.H.R.I.V.E. Warrior Horsemanship programs at HeartStrides Therapeutic Riding and Horsemanship in Olympia, WA that took place during the spring, summer and fall of 2016. Through an analysis of data collected by the organization, I found that the programs had positive impacts on their participants. The Hope with Horses program, geared toward helping adolescent girls, helped increase their agency, pathways to higher thinking, and hope scores and also increased their score on a resiliency survey. The Operation T.H.R.I.V.E. Warrior Horsemanship clinic assisted the veterans and other military personnel with creating new friendships and finding new ways to handle anxiety. The analysis of the collected data showed an increase in their ability to cope with stress after the completion of the program. For both programs, the equine-assisted learning activities were beneficial for both populations they served. The curriculum was outlined in detail so as to offer assistance for anyone looking to create a similar program in their area and provide a basic outline to be used by the organization in the future.

Throughout my placement with HeartStrides, I was given the opportunity to learn a great deal of information about running a nonprofit and got to see first-hand what it was like to be a Founder/Executive Director. I worked closely with the Founder/Executive Director, Kristy Dees, throughout 2016 learning the ins and outs of her nonprofit, the application of equine-assisted learning activities and program and curriculum development. Throughout my placement, I was given the opportunity to work on the

“behind the scenes” aspects of the nonprofit including writing budgets, applying for grants, updating the website, filing paperwork, signing the nonprofit up for government funding and donation opportunities, analyzing survey data, writing press releases and signing participants up for the programs offered. I was also given the opportunity for hands-on experiences that included fundraising and meeting with local sponsors and donors, auditing riding lessons, being a side-walker (an aid) for the hippotherapy program, assisting with community events such as the 4th of July parade, and being an assistant during the Hope with Horses weekly sessions and the Operation THRIVE Warrior Horsemanship clinic for veterans.

During my time working specifically on the program and curriculum development, the idea to apply these types of lessons to a different population began to form. I have always been interested in the criminal justice system and reentry work. With the help of Kristy Dees and the opportunities I was given in addition to my previous educational background focused on reentry, the idea for a reentry resource center with equine-assisted learning lessons began to develop. The Hope with Horses and Operation T.H.R.I.V.E. programs showed that equine-assisted learning activities can be applicable and helpful to very diverse populations. The idea to apply it to the formerly incarcerated population flowed naturally. This particular population also has experienced trauma (before, during and/or after incarceration), may have mental health concerns, and problems with positive relationships. Equine-assisted learning activities with the formerly incarcerated could result in positive impacts on coping with stress, agency, pathways to

higher thinking, hope and resilience levels just as seen with the teen girls and the veterans that could lead to closer knit and healthier communities.

Moving forward there is work to be done for both existing programs as well as to establish the Flying Changes program for the formerly incarcerated. Only a few months into 2017, HeartStrides has already seen tremendous growth as word of mouth is spreading positive information about the Hope with Horses and Operation T.H.R.I.V.E. programs. The nonprofit receives calls weekly asking for the next program session dates. Currently, Hope with Horses has session dates beginning the first week of May and lasting through the middle of June and Operation T.H.R.I.V.E. is scheduled for the first two weekends of August 2017.

With the popularity of these two programs, fundraising needs to continue, another staff member needs to be hired and additional volunteers will need to be trained. HeartStrides is currently working on writing grants to fund these two programs and actively fundraising for the Operation T.H.R.I.V.E. clinics to ensure there is no cost for the veterans. Moving forward with these two existing programs, grant-writing will be a major part of my new position within the nonprofit to ensure there is continued funding to support the growth of not only the programs, but of the nonprofit as a whole. This project will also be used to critically reflect on the two programs to better understand the successes, shortcomings and recommendations to improve the programs for the future sessions.

As HeartStrides continues to grow and expand its services, Dees is looking for new program ideas to help others in the community. She is looking at adding additional

programs that focus on substance abuse, alcoholism, and sex-addiction. While there have been some one-on-one sessions with crime victims and sex-trafficking survivors, Dees is also looking to add additional sessions or a larger program for these two populations, as well.

Additionally, Dees has been open to my idea of creating a program for the formerly incarcerated. This population could be difficult to reach out to unless we go through the local probation or parole department in our community. We also anticipate advertising on the organization's website, other social media outlets, and by hanging flyers around the court house and local businesses. Before the program could be implemented, the curriculum would take a few months to develop and grants would need to be written and awarded in order to pay for the mental health counselors, our salaries, the arena and horse rental and insurance. Data collection would also need to be considered. We would have to consider surveys that have already been written such as those used in the Hope with Horses program, or perhaps create our own. It would be important to have a survey that includes ways to measure the effects of the program curriculum and gauge whether or not the learning outcomes were effective. Also, it would be imperative to connect to other local organizations that work closely with parolees, probationers or those just released so I could ensure they are getting the access they need to other services such as housing, employment, food, etc. Otherwise the equine-assisted learning program would only be assisting them with some of the cognitive thinking and mental and emotional issues while leaving them vulnerable to other social problems that could inhibit their success.

With HeartStrides growing, and the popularity of the programs growing, this is an important time for the organization to reach out to the community and get them more involved in the issues HeartStrides is working to combat. Community outreach will also be another focus in the future as the organization grows and more people learn about the services available. Dees already has plans to partner with other local organizations in the community that focus on mental health, substance abuse, suicide and self-harm, the LGBTQ community and issues they face, crime victims, human-trafficking, and other social issues.

This project will be used to inform the next round of program implementation and curriculum development as well as to assist us when writing grant applications. In the future, Dees is also planning on publishing her curriculum as another way to bring in funds to the nonprofit. These two program evaluations are helping to shape the future of HeartStrides program designs and ensuring new programs develop with important details in mind including a way to measure success. I anticipate developing the Flying Changes curriculum during the end of 2017 and beginning of 2018, and working on grants and fundraising to obtain the funds needed for the pilot program. With the support of Dees and the HeartStrides staff and volunteers, I am confident the Flying Changes pilot program could be done in the spring of 2019.



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## Appendix 1. Resiliency Quiz



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### Resiliency Quiz - How Resilient Are You?

Resilient people overcome adversity, bounce back from setbacks, and can thrive under extreme, on-going pressure without acting in dysfunctional or harmful ways. The most resilient people recover from traumatic experiences stronger, better, and wiser. How resilient are you?

#### Take the Quiz...

Rate yourself from 1-5 on the following: (1 = very little, 5 = very strong). Circle the number that best indicates how you see yourself.

1 2 3 4 5	In a crisis or chaotic situation, I calm myself and focus on taking useful actions.
1 2 3 4 5	I'm usually optimistic. I see difficulties as temporary and expect to overcome them.
1 2 3 4 5	I can tolerate high levels of ambiguity and uncertainty about situations.
1 2 3 4 5	I adapt quickly to new developments. I'm good at bouncing back from difficulties.
1 2 3 4 5	I'm playful. I find the humor in rough situations, and can laugh at myself.
1 2 3 4 5	I'm able to recover emotionally from losses and setbacks. I have friends I can talk with, I can express my feelings to others and ask for help. Feelings of anger, loss and discouragement don't last long.
1 2 3 4 5	I feel self-confident, appreciate myself, and have a healthy concept of who I am.
1 2 3 4 5	I'm curious. I ask questions. I want to know how things work. I like to try new ways of doing things.
1 2 3 4 5	I learn valuable lessons from my experiences and from the experiences of others.
1 2 3 4 5	I'm good at solving problems. I can use analytical logic, be creative, or use practical common sense.
1 2 3 4 5	I'm good at making things work well. I'm often asked to lead groups and projects.
1 2 3 4 5	I'm very flexible. I feel comfortable with my paradoxical complexity. I'm optimistic and pessimistic, trusting and cautious, unselfish and selfish, and so forth.
1 2 3 4 5	I'm always myself, but I've noticed that I'm different in different situations.
1 2 3 4 5	I prefer to work without a written job description. I'm more effective when I'm free to do what I think is best in each situation.
1 2 3 4 5	I "read" people well and trust my intuition.
1 2 3 4 5	I'm a good listener. I have good empathy skills.
1 2 3 4 5	I'm non-judgmental about others and adapt to people's different personality styles.
1 2 3 4 5	I'm very durable. I hold up well during tough times. I have an independent spirit underneath my cooperative way of working with others.
1 2 3 4 5	I've been made stronger and better by difficult experiences.
1 2 3 4 5	I've converted misfortune into good luck and found benefits in bad experiences.

Megan Raphael  
Supporting you in living and leading courageously!

Al Siebert, PHD, author of *The Resiliency Advantage*



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## Resiliency Quiz Interpretation How Resilient Are You?

### Scoring

80 or higher	Very resilient!
65-80	Better than most
50-64	Adequate
40-49	You're struggling
39 or under	Life is tough for you; consider seeking help

### Interpretation:

Over 30 years of research into the inner nature of highly resilient people has created a clear understanding of human resiliency and how it develops. Highly resilient people show many similar characteristics:

**Playful, childlike curiosity.** Asks lots of questions, wants to know how things work. Plays with new ideas. Enjoys themselves as children do. Have a good time almost anywhere. Wonders about things, experiment, makes mistakes, gets hurt, laugh. Asks: "What is different now? What if I did this" Who can answer my questions? What is funny about this?"

**Constantly learns from experience.** Rapidly assimilates new or unexpected experiences and is open to being changed by them. Asks: "What is the lesson here? What early clues did I ignore? The next time that happens I will..."

**Adapts quickly.** Very mentally and emotionally flexible. Comfortable with contradictory personality qualities. Can be both strong and gentle, sensitive and tough, logical and intuitive, calm and emotional, serious and playful, etc. The more the better. Thinks in negative ways to reach positive outcomes: "What could go wrong, so it can be avoided?"

**Have solid self-esteem and self-confidence.** Has healthy self-esteem that allows taking in praise and compliments. Buffers against hurtful statements while being receptive to constructive criticism. "I like, appreciate and love myself..."

**Have good friendships and loving relationships.** Research shows that people in toxic working conditions are more stress resistant and less likely to get sick when they have a loving family and good friendships. Talking with friends and family diminishes the impact of difficulties and increases feelings of self-worth and self-confidence.

**Expresses feelings honestly.** Feels and expresses anger, love, dislike, appreciation, grief—the entire range of human emotions—honestly and openly. Chooses to suppress feelings when they believe it would be best to.

**Expects things to work out well.** Has deep optimism guided by internal values and standards. Tolerates ambiguity and uncertainty. Can work without a job description. Able to bring stability to chaos and crises. Focuses on the synergy of all. Asks: "How can I interact with this so that things turn out well for all of us."

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### Interpretation, continued:

**Reads others with empathy.** Sees things through the perspectives of others, even antagonists. Approaches conflict with win/win attitude. Asks: "What do others think and feel? What is it like to be them? How do they experience me? How have I contributed, positively or negatively, to the situation? What is legitimate about what they feel, say or do? How can we solve this together for a mutually-beneficial outcome?"

**Uses intuition , creative hunches.** Accepts subliminal perceptions and intuition as valid, useful sources of information. Asks: "What is my body telling me? Did that daydream mean anything? Why don't I believe what I'm being told? What is my intuition telling me now?"

**Stands up for self.** Teaches others how to treat them. Speaks up about wants and needs. Sets boundaries and limits. Finds allies, resources and support.

**Gets better and better every year, every decade.** Sees progress in becoming more durable, competent, playful and free. Spends less time 'surviving' and more time thriving in all areas of life. Enjoys life more and more.

**Would you like to be more resilient? Would you like to enjoy your life more?**

**Contact me today to learn more about Courage Coaching and Public Speaking:  
 Inspiration and information for courageously creating the life you've always  
 wanted.**

Warmly,

Megan

Megan Raphael  
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## Appendix 2. Hope (Future) Scale

## The (Hope) Future Scale

Read each item carefully. Using the scale shown below, please select the number that best describes you and put that number in the blank provided.

1=Definitely False  
2=Mostly False  
3=Somewhat False  
4=Slightly False

5=Slightly True  
6=Somewhat True  
7=Mostly True  
8=Definitely True

- 
- \_\_\_ 1. I can think of many ways to get out of a jam.  
\_\_\_ 2. I energetically pursue my goals.  
\_\_\_ 3. I feel tired most of the time.  
\_\_\_ 4. There are lots of ways around any problem.  
\_\_\_ 5. I am easily downed in an argument.  
\_\_\_ 6. I can think of many ways to get the things in life that are most important to me.  
\_\_\_ 7. I worry about my health.  
\_\_\_ 8. Even when others get discouraged, I know I can find a way to solve the problem.  
\_\_\_ 9. My past experiences have prepared me well for my future.  
\_\_\_ 10. I've been pretty successful in life.  
\_\_\_ 11. I usually find myself worrying about something.  
\_\_\_ 12. I meet the goals that I set for myself.
- 

Agency: \_\_\_\_\_

Add Scores on items: 2, 9, 10 and 12. Scores range from a 4 to a 32. Higher scores reflect higher agency.

Pathways: \_\_\_\_\_

Add scores on items: 1, 4, 6 and 8. . Scores range from a 4 to a 32. Higher scores reflect higher pathways thinking.

Total Hope Score: \_\_\_\_\_ (Add Score for Pathways to the Score for Agency)

Add the agency and pathway scores. Scores of 40 – 48 are hopeful, 48 – 56 moderately hopeful, and 56 or higher as high hope.

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### Appendix 3. Operation THRIVE Warrior Horsemanship Clinic Evaluation

What were your expectations of the Operation THRIVE clinic before it began?

How well did the clinic meet your expectations? (1=not met, 10=exceeded expectations):

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

Rate your ability to cope with stress before the clinic (1=very little ability, 10=very strong ability):

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

Rate your ability to cope with stress after the clinic: (1=very little ability, 10=very strong ability):

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

Did you learn any new skills?

If yes, how will you apply these skills to your daily life? And if you won't, why not?

How will these lessons help you approach stressful situations differently than before?

What was the most unexpected thing that you learned during this clinic?

What was your favorite activity during the clinic?

What was your least favorite activity during the clinic?

What is your biggest take away from this clinic?

Do you have any suggestions to make this clinic better?