

THE HEALING POWER OF PETS

Animals prove to be a source of acceptance and love

By Julie Warren

The counseling office at Allegheny College, Meadville, Pa., is decorated with pictures of students petting, holding, and even lying down next to two unusual therapy assistants. Maggie, a 7 ½-year-old, 68-pound, blonde Labrador retriever, and Zeus, her 7-year-old, 90-pound sibling, pose on all fours with every manner of college student. The students' relaxed, comforted, sometimes joyful expressions in the photos help explain

the enthusiasm for animal-assisted therapy that permeates the counseling office.

"There are actually three ways in which animals can be used," explains Yvonne Eaton-Stull, 41, director of counseling services at Allegheny and a licensed clinical social worker. "Animal-assisted activities, animal-assisted therapy, and animal-assisted crisis." Maggie and Zeus assist in all three.

The animals used for therapy sessions at Allegheny are required to pass the Delta

Society program with a re-evaluation every two years, says Eaton-Stull. This ensures that all animals have the right disposition and training.

Delta Society is a national, Washington state-based not-for-profit, which, among other activities, offers training certifications for dogs.

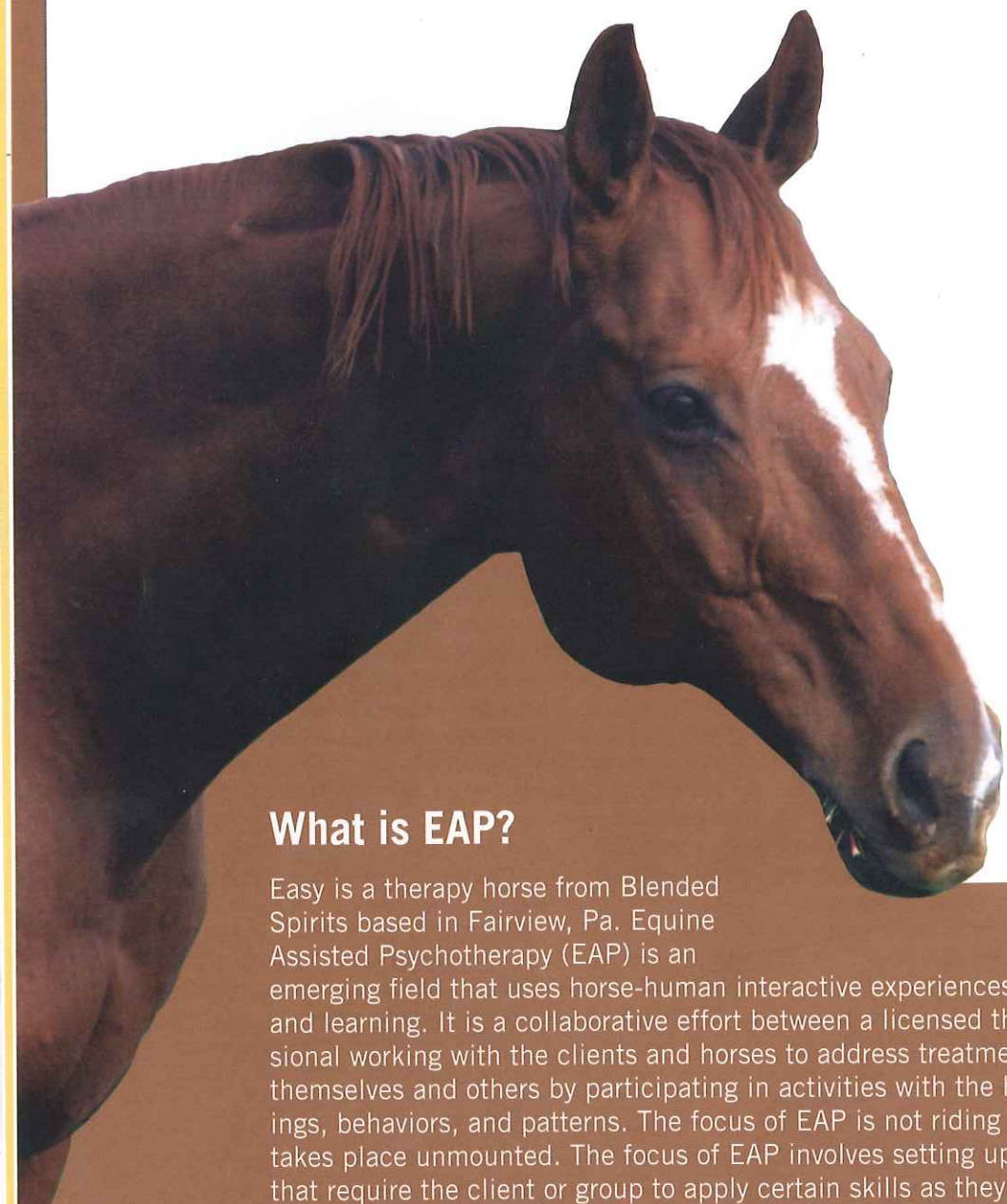
Unlike Maggie and Zeus, whose primary therapy setting is on campus, Therapy Dogs United (TDU), based in Erie, Pa., offers animal-assisted activities and animal-assisted therapy throughout Erie, Pittsburgh, Buffalo and Jamestown.

"This is a grass roots organization that started in Erie, Pa., about two years ago and has expanded," explains Pat Van Zandt, 43, executive director. TDU dogs are trained in the American Kennel Society Good Citizen Test, then move on to the therapy dog evaluation to ensure that they will be calm, even amid distractions. AKS and Delta are just two of many programs available nationally to train animals.

"There are two types of visits a therapy dog would make; the first is help in the happy department," Van Zandt says. The second is animal-assisted therapy, which incorporates the skills of a licensed professional to encourage consumers to reach their goals based on a clear treatment plan. For instance, if a physical therapy goal is to have someone use her right arm, a dog may be incorporated to encourage petting or grooming with that arm. TDU works with almost all ages and responds to a variety of needs.

What is EAP?

Easy is a therapy horse from Blended Spirits based in Fairview, Pa. Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) is an emerging field that uses horse-human interactive experiences to facilitate emotional growth and learning. It is a collaborative effort between a licensed therapist and a horse professional working with the clients and horses to address treatment goals. Participants learn about themselves and others by participating in activities with the horses, and then discussing feelings, behaviors, and patterns. The focus of EAP is not riding or horsemanship. This therapy takes place unmounted. The focus of EAP involves setting up activities involving the horses that require the client or group to apply certain skills as they interact with the animals.



"Hospice requests are never refused," she says. And TDU dogs can also be found in many other settings, including schools assisting children in wrap-around programs and at the Barber National Institute, Erie, Pa., working with autistic children.

Although dogs have been successfully used to assist in therapy, they may not be the best animals for the work. Horses may be a better fit. The field of Equine-assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) was founded 15 years ago. Blended Spirits Ranch (BSR), in Fairview, Pa., is the first provider in Northwestern Pennsylvania to concentrate solely on EAP, which uses the combined expertise of a licensed therapist and a horse professional working with clients to create treatment goals.

Sandy Long, 47, BSR executive director, and Debbie Ellis, 52, co-founder, studied with EAP founder Greg Kersten and brought his model to Erie several years ago. BSR is also tracking outcomes of EAP, using the Rosenberg self esteem scale, which was developed by Morris Rosenberg and is a widely-used measure of self esteem in social science research. BSR reports that clients' self esteem consistently goes up, while violent tendencies have decreased by as much as 75 percent.

Empirically, such dramatic results are hard to ignore. Even more difficult to ignore are the magnificent animals that help to bring about these changes. Easy, a 20-year-old male, was rescued from another facility that decided to retire him.

When Easy arrived at BSR, he had arthritis, swollen joints, and turned-in hoofs. Ellis and Long trimmed the hoofs and let him go shoeless to help heal his legs. After such care, Easy has filled out. His coat has taken on a gloss, while his personality has become perky, gentle and easygoing.

"As soon as I introduced Easy to the kids, he had a spring in his step. He had a job," Long says, adding that he has become one of the children's favorites. Easy took to the equine-assisted psychotherapy program like "a duck to water," she says.

Horses like Easy work with a cross-section of children, including youth who are troubled, autistic, or socially disadvantaged,

and organizations including Sarah Reed Children's Center and Perseus House Inc. both located in Erie, Pa.

Annie, another rescued horse, was



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Sandy Long, executive director of Blended Spirits Ranch, poses with Elijah, one of the healing horses in its EAP program.

exclusively used as a brood mare in her previous life. When Long explains this to the children, she tells them that her sole purpose was to make babies. When someone asked why Annie was sometimes mean and didn't want to be handled, a young girl who had been sexually molested spoke up.

"Probably because she doesn't want to be touched anymore." It was a breakthrough moment, Long says.

Ellis explains that central to the equine-assisted psychotherapy program is teaching natural horsemanship. By learning the discipline, respect and self awareness needed to properly handle a horse, clients develop

better self esteem, self awareness, confidence and coping skills. In short, therapy occurs. Although Blended Spirits Ranch is the only program that bases its entire program on EAP, they are not the only program offering these services.

The Therapeutic Riding Equestrian Center (TREC) in Fairview, Pa., has added equine-assisted psychotherapy to its program, but has focused mainly on hippotherapy for treatment. Hippotherapy uses the movement of the horse for occupational, physical and speech therapy and has been the primary form of therapy for the more than 30 years the group center has been in existence.

Much like Therapy Dogs United and Allegheny College Animals, TREC horses are required to pass an evaluation process, including determination of disposition and sensitivity to props that may be used in therapy sessions, explains Danielle Clark, 48, therapeutic riding instructor at TREC.

With the addition of equine-assisted psychotherapy, TREC is able to offer customized sessions based on client treatment goals, Clark explains.

"For example, I might run a family session and put the family in the arena with the horse. Their job as a group might be to construct a jump and lead the horse through the jump. This exercise immediately helps me and the family to see how the family dynamics work in a problem solving situation," Clark explains. She is then able to use the exercise as a springboard to discuss what roles each family member plays and how those roles may affect the health of the family.

Horses, by their sheer size and weight, demand attention, focus and respect, while dogs offer unconditional love and support. Whether petting a 90-pound dog to assist with anxiety symptoms or managing a 900-pound horse to learn respect and problem solving, many have benefited from the unconditional acceptance and unique spirits of the animals trained in animal-