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Horses are the best medicine at Xenophon Therapeutic Riding Center

By Vera Kochan



Alexa (center) with Orinda's Xenophon support staff, leads her horse, George. Photo Vera Kochan

The brainchild of founder Judy Lazarus, Xenophon began in 1993 at Black Point Farm in Martinez before moving in 1996 to its current location of 60 Don Gabriel Way in Orinda. The therapeutic riding center was named for Xenophon (430-354 B.C.E.), a Greek general who was the first to write a manual about how to train horses in a positive way.

Lazarus and her husband have an autistic son and became very involved with the disabled community. Having ridden horses as a child she was aware of how beneficial the experience could be for anyone and decided to open her center with an eye to offering basic horsemanship skills interwoven with an individual's therapeutic needs.

The 3-acre property currently contains a covered arena, a viewing deck, a wooden horse shed, winter quarters for the horses, and a new office building. The facility's eight horses of varying breeds work with licensed physical therapists, therapeutic riding instructors and occupational therapists - registered through the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH). There are also an army of volunteers that serve as side-walkers, horse-handlers, horse caretakers, and facility maintenance workers.

Xenophon is an accredited center under PATH, having received a 100% score during its last accreditation visit, and the only such center serving Alameda and Contra Costa Counties. Their mission is "to enrich the lives of children and adults with disabilities through a high-quality program of equine-assisted activities and therapies, including therapeutic horseback riding, hippotherapy [therapy that utilizes the natural gait and movement of a horse to provide motor and sensory input], horsemanship, life skills and related activities."

The center provides therapy to a wide range of "participants," from pediatric to young adults; veterans or Alzheimer's sufferers and their caregivers. The horses become attuned to their riders' needs and form a symbiotic relationship.

Military veterans are typically referred by the VA Medical Center in Martinez and occasionally through Wounded Warriors. Xenophon offers vets a program titled Operation Hooves on the Ground geared to helping those with traumatic brain injuries and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Matthew Carroll, a Danville resident, served with Search and Rescue in the Navy. So far he has had four half-hour sessions with Go-Go (his horse). Currently a police officer, Carroll was injured at work and was looking for something to keep him busy, he said. Carroll is disappointed that the military doesn't do a better job of preparing vets for life after the service. "There's no transition. I come here to just get my service experience out of my head. Reading a horse is like reading a person. It's interesting how in tune you can get with a horse."

Carroll said therapy at Xenophon is a very alternative type of thing. "You just have to try it," he said. "It may not work for everybody, and I think it's just as much therapy for the horses. I also wear boots a lot, and people ask me if I'm a cowboy."

John Davenport, a former Army paratrooper who served for 10 years during the Gulf War and in Iraq, and later as a recruiter just before and during 9/11, has been coming to Xenophon from Vacaville since late 2018. "I look forward to this every week," he enthusiastically replied. "Bo [his horse] can be challenging. He brings his A-game. As I'm learning, I'm dealing with his temperament. When you're out here and learning, it's a partnership and it helps me to use that when I interact with people. They [the horses] share when they need their space. With a horse, you're able to live in the moment."

Davenport owns a permaculture design business (he designs drought tolerant garden spaces). Besides suffering from PTSD, tragedy struck him with his 20-year-old son's suicide and his 22-year-old daughter's murder. "I was afraid to deal with people because of the anger I carried inside. I think I've found peace," he said. "I use this place as maintenance; I've been working on getting a balance in my life. This place reminds me of how we can look to tomorrow with hope."

Army Medical Lab Technician Dwuna Ebel-Tom enlisted in 1987 and served for 20 years. Stationed at Fort

Bragg, she helped to provide blood supplies from donors and processed units to be deployed during the Gulf War; also serving a year in the Sinai Peninsula with multi-national forces and observers. "It was sometimes hard being a female in the military, but not that different being in the medical field," she explained. "I had to show that, no, I'm not worried about my nails.

"Once I retired from the military and the structure was taken away I began to feel deep anxiety and then developed ADHD [attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder]," she stated. "I felt like I had a loss of identity. I'm not a soldier anymore - who am I?"

A resident of Antioch and the owner of a floral business, Ebel-Tom has been coming to Xenophon for almost four years. "It's a little bit of structure, and I totally enjoy it. Not just the people, but the connection with the horses. It helped with my anxiety and ADHD - to be in the moment. I help to get the horse to release its tension, and it helps me to relax. I've calmed down and it helps me to focus." She also enjoys the benefit of camaraderie with the other veterans.

Xenophon's therapy continues to help disabled children with a wide range of issues. Lauren Wong, age 7, who rides Kiwi, was born with a gene variant (ALG13-CDG). Besides suffering seizures, she has a developmental delay which resulted in her 6-8 month old age range of skills. "We wanted her to walk and strengthen her core," stated her mom, Mary. After a year, "the experience for her is better than traditional therapy. She does smile and she shows her enjoyment. I don't know what we would've done without this place."

Simon Keenan, 12, came to Xenophon four years ago, after two years on the waiting list. His mom, Alicia, is thrilled with how much the therapy has helped her son, who has Down syndrome. "He absolutely loves it! He looks forward to coming. It provides him with confidence and a social aspect. It gives him a sense of responsibility. It's something he can say that he does. The summer camp they provide here is a diamond. It's hard to find a summer camp for kids with disabilities."

According to Executive Director Jean Johnstone, before any horse is considered therapy-providing material, the original owner allows their horse to go through a screening process to see if they are in good shape and safe for participants to ride. If they pass, a veterinarian gives them a physical. All new horses are then quarantined for 30 days to make sure they don't have any communicable diseases, after which staff members begin to train them. Under a "free lease agreement" Xenophon will continue to provide all of the horses' needs (medical, food, and even massages), until the horses "tell" them they're no longer happy with the job, at which point they are returned to the owner.

Xenophon Therapeutic Riding Center is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation. For more information or to make a donation visit: www.xenophontrc.org or call (925) 377-0871.

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