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Participants in an equine therapy program along with trainers are seen interacting with horses at Jameson Humane in Napa.

ANIMAL ASSISTED HEALING

Jameson Humane, Collabria Care, Connected Horse, Sunrise Horse Rescue team for project

RACHEL RASKIN-ZRIHEN

You may have heard of Equine Assisted Healing – communing with horses as a therapy tool – which is available in Napa Valley through local Alzheimer’s organization Collabria Care and now also in partnership with Jameson Humane. But, if you think you may have a better rapport with, say, a pig, a lamb, a cow, a pigeon, or something else, that’s also in the works, through Jameson Humane and its partners, Jameson officials said.

Jameson has partnered with Napa County nonprofits, Collabria Care, and



A horse is seen during an equine therapy program at Jameson Humane in Napa.

Sunrise Horse Rescue in Connected Horse, an equine-assisted healing program. The program provides support to Napa County residents suffering from memory loss, including early-stage dementia and Alzheimer's disease, agency officials said. Two successful pilot workshops took place in Napa County in April and June, supported by the Elke's Foundation, Winifred Johnson Clive Foundation, and Collabria Care, they said.

As Napa's Alzheimer's Day Care Resource Center, Collabria Care's main role in the program is identifying and screening Napa County community members for inclusion. Additional workshops

were held in September and October, with Spanish translation available.

As two of Napa County's animal sanctuaries and horse rescues, Jameson Humane and Sunrise Horse Rescue officials saw an opportunity to provide individuals in need, along with their caregivers, a unique chance for healing, officials said. It turns out that the arrangement is also good for the resident horses at each location, they added.

"Sunrise Horse Rescue has been working on bringing this program to the community for several years," the agency's board president Lisa O'Connor said in a press release. "We are thrilled to have

been able to partner with our fellow nonprofits in the Valley, and officially launch this life-impacting experience for our local community."

Healing sessions with horses – Jameson Humane's first foray into animal-assisted therapy – is already producing results, says Jameson spokesperson Maral Papakhian and its new animal-assisted healing director, Mackenzie Lovie.

"It's about being in the moment – which is where horses live all the time," Papakhian said. "The horses are the teachers in this program, and near miracles have been witnessed."

Susan Davis became one of those



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first-hand witnesses when she accompanied a friend being treated at one of the organization's recent healing workshop.

"The program was very helpful at a personal level, combining relaxation and sensory techniques with interaction with the horses," Davis said in an email. "The program is for caregivers and their friend (I don't want to say for what issue). My friend asked me to accompany her."

Davis said the best part of the experience was "spending time with my friend and the staff and, obviously, getting acquainted with the horses. I left the days more centered and grounded. Frankly, I think everyone could benefit (from this program)."

Papakhian said she believes the horse therapy effort began with discussions between officials from Jameson and Sunrise Horse Rescue after the latter reached out about partnering in a Connected Horse program.

"Monica Stevens, our co-founder,

has a personal connection with Collabria Care, and so she connected with them for the outreach of participants," she said.

Papakhian said the Connected Horse program nor any of the others in the works would be possible without Jameson's donors.

As the horse program is aimed at assisting with memory-related issues, other creatures have been found to help with other problems, she said.

"Like our therapy pig, Obi, who assists with mental health care and kids, and our pony, Cher, who has helped a young girl with Noonan's disease and anxiety," Papakhian said.

Saying she's "excited to share about the new (horse-related) program we have launched collaboratively with several other nonprofits in the area," Papakhian said the horse program "is specifically focused on impacting those suffering from memory loss, dementia, and Alzheimer's, and their care partners, but we

hope it opens the door to several other animal assisted healing programs for many other segments of the population and community soon."

About a year in development, the connected horses program took a lot of planning and the first workshop started in the spring, she said.

"The COVID pandemic played a role in its development by shedding a light on mental health issues globally and locally," Papakhian said. "During that time, Jameson officials became aware that the existing Connected Horse group offers help for Alzheimer's sufferers, and it seemed like a worthy effort to get involved with."

"Horses are so large, they bring people into the present moment really well," she said. "It involves different kinds of activities. The whole idea is to be less in your mind, but make it more experiential – for both the patient and the caregiver."

This also helps the horses which at



Patricia Sullivan, a participant in an equine therapy program interacts with a horse at Jameson Humane in Napa.

Jameson are all rescues, and not working, Lovie said.

“So when humans come to them, they’re naturally curious and commune with them,” she said. “It’s enriching for the horses too. It’s fascinating to see.”

These findings mirror what Connected Horse officials also noticed, she said.

“We’ve been floored often, when, for instance, horses who have had trauma, come right up to people and interact. It’s been really special for us to witness,” she said.

Jameson’s animal-assisted therapy program is “a true collaboration between the various involved organizations,” built during conversations together about how Napa County has the resources for these groups of people to take advantage of and to benefit from this type of healing, Papa-khian said.

“The idea of animal assisted healing has been around, and we’ve worked with an organization that works with domestic



Participants in an equine therapy program along with trainers are seen talking in a circle near a horse at Jameson Humane in Napa.



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Fred James, right, and Dale Rosemeyer participants in an equine therapy program interact with a horse at Jameson Humane in Napa.



Participants in an equine therapy program gently touch a horse at Jameson Humane in Napa.

violence victims, people with anxiety and other issues, who feel better having spent time with animals. It was a matter of crystalizing it into an actual program,” Lovie said.

Now that these partnerships with organizations like Collabria Care have resulted in the Connected Horse Program workshops at Jameson, incorporating other creatures is being studied, Lovie said.

“Our hope is to continue to do research and see how it can work with other creatures and other types of problems people have,” she said. “We don’t know what the future holds, but we’re trying to figure out what populations can benefit and what the big picture umbrellas are, and what kinds of partners would work with what kinds of programs.”

A licensed clinical social worker/therapist working mainly with adults with serious mental disorders before coming to Jameson, Lovie said it’s not necessary



Susan Davis, a participant in an equine therapy program at Jameson Humane in Napa.



Dale Rosemeyer, a participant in an equine therapy program at Jameson Humane in Napa.



Patricia Sullivan, a participant in an equine therapy program at Jameson Humane in Napa.

to “reinvent the wheel,” with these new programs.

“I’d known about Jameson for a while,” she said. “A year ago, at the farmers market, I ran into (someone) who had an adorable potbellied pig and I fell in love with him and the wheels started spinning and I started wondering what could be done to help people with the possibility of a therapy pig.”

Since then, Obi the pig has visited schools and community events, and “worked with me, and I thought there is a connection with these special animals,” Lovie said. “And there are so many special animals at Jameson. What can we do to help the community and the animals?”

Connected Horse is actively involved in Alzheimer’s research, including early work with the University of California, Davis School of Medicine, Alzheimer’s Disease Center, and the School of Veterinary Medicine, and Center for Equine Health, to study the effects of its equine-guided activities to further understand and develop programs that benefit everyone involved, organization officials said.

“We believe that when someone receives a diagnosis of dementia, there is an opening, an opportunity to activate hope and action, versus despair and isolation,” Connected Horse Co-Founder Paula Hertel said. “We know from many studies that engagement and lifestyle play an important part in health and wellness. The equine-assisted workshops we offer build on that knowledge with opportunities to benefit from the human and



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Fred James, a participant in an equine therapy program at Jameson Humane in Napa.

animal bond, nonverbal communication skills, and awareness and mindfulness practices.”

Papakhain said much nonverbal communication takes place between the animals and their human clients.

“That comfort being around a non-judging being where you don’t have to talk, but just to be around a being where you can get an emotional response,” she said. “They can be their emotional foundation that can give positive reinforcement and also teach boundaries, whether it’s a kitten or a big cow. Learning to read nonverbal cues is important, and allows

people to express themselves in other ways.”

The horses can get at least as much out of the sessions as the human participants, organizers said.

“It was really eye-opening and magical to see our horses take on a new purpose in this program,” said Loren Crow, Equine Manager at Jameson Humane.

“There is so much research around the animal bond with people,” she said. “Many animals have that kind of power. I personally think all animals do. Even animals people can only observe can get something out of it. That’s the really cool thing about Jameson’s program. You never know what animal is going to connect with someone.”

Papakhian whole-heartedly agrees.

“You hear about emotional support alligators, and stuff like that,” she said. “Different people connect with different animals in different ways – lambs, chickens, pigs, goats, cows, sheep, horses, cats. Each has its own way about it. Some, like horse, are empathetic, and can sense issues like sadness in people.”

So, organizers are working toward moving beyond the equine-assisted therapy.

“We’re really trying to research ... having people and animals together in a safe way is a critical ingredient, and our job is to create the opportunity, the background and the training to make it go well,” Lovie said. “Research is ongoing. What are the best ways to meet the needs presented? And to do it the right way?”



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However, not all animals are right for such work, and no animal is forced to participate, Lovie said.

"Some animals don't get along, so our team of animal care experts keep in tune with the cues. We're not going to force animals to be part of helping people if this is not what they're comfortable with," she said. "It's about being in the moment and meeting people where they're at. You can't force these things. You take it at the person's and the animal's pace. It's a slow introduction process."

If a horse doesn't feel like interacting with people at the moment, that's perfectly fine. They have their own choice about being involved, or the extent to which they want to be involved, the women said.

This will also hold for the other animals that might serve as animal-assisted healers.

Lovie has been working on various population segments who could benefit from animal-assisted healing... "What kind of animal would be most helpful for what challenges?" she said. "There's more and more research about this. A lot of it is from doing it and getting feedback."

The outcomes can be nearly

magical, said Connected Horse Co-Founder Nancy Schier Anzelmo.

"Being with horses allows people to feel what they are often unable to articulate with words. The interactions help to maintain quality of life and gain relief from isolation, stress, and loss of connection for people affected by dementia and their care partner," she said. "We've seen people start their bucket lists, travel, and do things together. We've seen intimacy in relationships heal. It's just amazing, and it's all because of the horses; because they're our teachers."

For more information on:

Enrolling or supporting the horse program, contact Melissa Gerard, Collabria Care, (707) 815-6258, mgerard@collabriacare.org.

Equine-Assisted Learning and Healing Programs at Sunrise Horse Rescue, contact Lindsay Merget, lindsaymerget@att.net.

Connected Horse program, contact Nancy Schier Anzelmo, nancy@connectedhorse.org.

The Animal Assisted Healing program at Jameson Humane and for those interested in supporting it, contact Monica Stevens, monica@jamesonhumane.org. ■

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