

Reaching Beyond Boundaries: Erick



Erick, Retired US Army Specialist 5, who is both deaf and blind, was an adaptive riding client at NCEFT.

"It's like having a guide dog you can ride," jokes Erick M., Retired US Army Specialist 5. Erick was responding to a question about what the horses at NCEFT mean to him. Erick is both deaf and blind, yet with the assistance of VA Recreational Therapist Lindsay Connor, NCEFT Adaptive Riding Instructor Heather Schilling, and a devoted team of horse handlers and side walkers, Erick is able to participate in a sport that he enjoyed in his youth.

Lindsay communicates with Erick by "writing" words onto his hand using a stylus. They are quite a team, and the pace of the resulting conversation might surprise you. Erick's sense of humor is quick and readily apparent, as is the pleasure he takes in horseback riding. As Erick tells it, when he began to lose his sight after already losing his hearing, he first dwelt upon the things he could no longer do. No longer could he drive a car, no longer could he ride a bicycle, and no longer could he participate in his favorite hobby, boating.

But, realizing that the area in which he lives has a lot of horses, Erick's natural resilience lead his thoughts to a youthful experience he had at a barn. That, in turn, inspired his interest in the possibility of riding recreationally again—and with the help of the VA, Erick found NCEFT.

"For several years I had an after-school job working in a stable. I enjoyed it, and when I was thinking about riding, I thought it would be nice to do something I did years ago. And here it is, right here [at NCEFT]. "



Lindsay giving Erick instructions by "writing" with a stylus on Erick's hand.

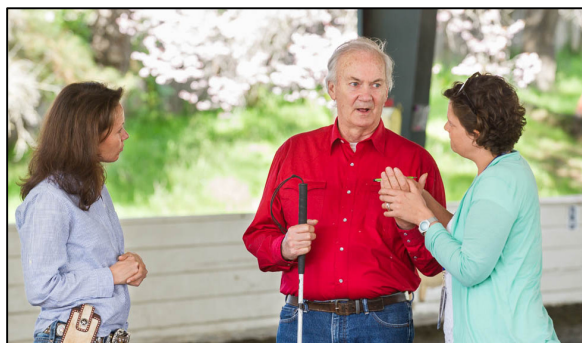
The "it" Erick references is NCEFT's Adaptive Riding Program. Adaptive riding emphasizes the acquisition of riding and horsemanship skills, both on and off the horse, in an effort to achieve physical, emotional, and cognitive goals. Instructors modify lesson plans to accommodate the needs of each individual, tailoring lessons towards specific short- and long-term goals. NCEFT's adaptive riding instructors are certified by the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH Intl.). PATH, formed in 1969, is widely recognized as a global authority, resource, and advocate for equine-assisted activities.



Erick's riding instruction is adapted to his needs, including special interaction with his side walkers to enable navigation. This keeps Erick safe and also enables a level of independence that Erick appreciates.

disabilities, physical injuries, and post-traumatic stress injuries. Participants in the program can participate in any of NCEFT's treatments: physical, occupational, and speech therapy conducted on horseback, adaptive riding, or equine-assisted mental health sessions. All are designed to encourage physical, cognitive, and emotional rehabilitation, providing Veterans with a safe environment in which to regain independence, confidence, and strength. NCEFT receives no governmental funding (including from the VA) nor do we charge any Veteran clients fees for services. Instead, we rely on the generosity of our supporters to fund the entirety of the Veterans Program via donations.

Erick hopes to see more Veterans participate in NCEFT's program, noting that "Even if they've never ridden before, I think they should give it a try... When I leave [NCEFT], I feel like I've accomplished something."



NCEFT Adaptive Riding Instructor Heather Schilling confers with Erick and his VA Recreational Therapist Lindsay Conner prior to the session to discuss goals and activities for the day.

In Erick's adaptive riding sessions, his horse is lead for him part of the time by a horse handler. Erick also uses reins to independently guide the horse through different patterns and obstacle courses. Erick's side walkers guard him to ensure he stays safely on the horse and also use special commands to assist him with navigation. For example, when Erick needs to halt, a side walker will lower their arm across Erick's arm in a perpendicular motion, prompting him to sit up straight, pull back on the reins, and ask his horse to stop.

Erick reaches beyond his boundaries to ride, saying, "Coming here and riding gives me the feeling that there are still things I can do."

Erick, like any active-duty or Veteran military personnel, participates in activities at NCEFT at no cost. The NCEFT Veterans Program was launched over a decade ago and has helped hundreds of Veterans with



Erick pictured with his side walking team.



Erick mounts from NCEFT's elevated platform with assistance from his instructor and side walkers. NCEFT is also equipped with a lift for patients and clients who cannot mount from a standing position.

