

# Reaching Beyond Boundaries: Stephen



US Army Veteran Stephen became a physical therapy patient at NCEFT following excision of a brain tumor.

Way out east of San Francisco beyond Modesto lies the small municipality of Oakdale, California, home to about 23,000 residents. Oakdale may style itself as the cowboy capital of the world, but one resident horseback rider journeys two hours west—four hours round trip, weekly—for life-changing work atop a very special equine therapy horse.

Stephen, a lean young man a little over six feet tall, was fresh out of high school, had completed US Army basic training, and was just beginning advanced individual training with an intention to move into the field of explosive ordnance disposal when debilitating headaches and nausea put his plans on hold. Ultimately, Stephen's life and abilities changed dramatically following diagnosis and removal of a brain tumor.

Stephen first came to NCEFT in 2015. He was then a patient at the VA Palo Alto Healthcare System Polytrauma Unit where he'd undergone surgery, and at Stanford Medical Center where he was participating in a clinical trial involving chemotherapy, radiation, and immunotherapy. During his time at Stanford and the VA, Stephen was also working with recreational and other therapists. All of Stephen's therapists knew about equine-assisted therapy and recommended that Stephen and his parents, Laura and Kent, investigate NCEFT for physical therapy.

When Stephen arrived at NCEFT, he was somewhat withdrawn. He demonstrated severe difficulty walking, exceptionally poor motor control and trunk strength, double vision, and anxiety. Laura says of their first visit, "I probably covered my eyes seven or eight times during his session because I was afraid he was going to fall off the horse. Chris (Chris Swan, NCEFT program director and physical therapist) was worried, too. But we came back the next week and tried again and he was better. And Chris let Stephen stay."

Stephen's seat on his horse is relatively stable. But when he first came to NCEFT, Stephen had difficulty stabilizing his trunk, resulting in a significant and somewhat alarming amount of swaying whenever his horse moved. In equine-assisted physical therapy, sessions are conducted using side walkers. Side walkers are people who walk alongside patients and hold onto them to keep them safely on the horse.



For about two years, Stephen and his mom, Laura, have been making a weekly four-hour round trip for Stephen's equine-assisted physical therapy sessions.



Stephen has made tremendous physical gains. He has also developed a special knack for making his therapy team smile.

Everyone at NCEFT wanted to help Stephen...and everyone who did was just a little bit disconcerted by the swaying. NCEFT Volunteer Coordinator Alison Haazer put it well when she mentioned to Laura that when Stephen started, his side walkers had a “death grip” on his legs and ankles.



Two years later, it's quite a different story. These days, Stephen's sessions are punctuated with Chris' calls of “Good!” and “That's it!” as Stephen works diligently to tighten his core muscles and correct his posture and balance. Stephen has come a very long way. Today, his side walkers are barely holding on.

Still, it's harder for Stephen than you might think...and for a different reason than you might guess. Now the typical reason for any instability on Stephen's part is a shaking fit of laughter brought on by the good-natured banter among Stephen, Chris, and the rest of Stephen's therapy team. (We're pretty sure Stephen's horse joins in, too—but for the most part, he patiently carries on with the work at hand and leaves the humor to the humans.)

And Stephen? Well, he just doesn't seem terribly anxious these days. Instead, he tells the team about the intricacies of the latest video game he's played or movie he's watched, or cracks jokes about his daily life or adventures with adaptive skiing and kayaking.



Standing in stirrups is one of many exercises that help redevelop Stephen's leg and core strength.

Of the journey Stephen is on, Laura observes, “When Stephen first started coming to NCEFT, he was in a wheelchair most of the day. We've watched over the past two years as he's progressed to using a walker for 70 to 80 percent of the day. The weekly therapy and redevelopment of his trunk control has helped him immensely.” She pauses, smiles, and adds, “In many different ways.”



NCEFT's Veterans Program provides free treatment to active-duty and Veteran military personnel.

The gains Stephen has made come from his hard work and willingness to reach beyond the boundaries his illness set for him. His progression from reliance on a wheelchair to using a walker is a milestone in his journey towards greater freedom. Every week, he gets closer and closer to independent walking, and that's an incredible achievement. For his part, Stephen is humble about his level of commitment and work ethic, saying simply that he likes coming to NCEFT because “it is good for me.”