

## Make a Difference by Volunteering at NCEFT



*Physical, occupational or speech therapy that utilizes equine movement is sometimes referred to as hippotherapy. Adaptive riding teaches horsemanship with instruction adapted to a person's disability or injury.*

It takes a special kind of person to help a child like Trent, who was born with a brain malformation. Before treatment at the National Center for Equine Facilitated Therapy (NCEFT), Trent could barely stand or communicate. Today, after long-term work focusing on core strengthening, balance and body awareness, he can walk almost independently and is beginning to talk.

Trent couldn't have made the progress he's made without the expert support of his therapist and the volunteers who walk alongside him in his physical therapy sessions, keeping him safely aboard his horse.

It also takes an extraordinary kind of person to help a military Veteran with disabilities. Just a few short years ago, one Marine Corps officer came to NCEFT unable to follow directions or enjoy social interaction—but you would never know it today! Now, during his adaptive riding sessions, he can follow multistep directions to steer his horse through obstacle courses. He also manages his own schedule and service dog, chats with his volunteer side walkers and others, and is joyfully helping care for his first child.

So, just who are the remarkable people who have made such a difference in these patients' lives? NCEFT volunteers! Virtually every type of equine-assisted therapy NCEFT offers—whether it is physical, occupational or speech therapy, adaptive riding, special-education class outdoor education, or camp—depends upon the volunteers who walk alongside patients and clients to keep them safe, the volunteers who help sweep, weed, and maintain our beautiful 12-acre facility, and the volunteers who help with office and event activities.



*Every moment volunteers spend at NCEFT is valued. Those over age 16 can train as side walkers; youth ages 12-16 can help with grounds keeping and camp. Email [volunteers@nceft.org](mailto:volunteers@nceft.org) to sign up.*

Maybe you've thought about volunteering at NCEFT but have yet to take the plunge. Would it be fun, you ask? Would my sacrifice of time be worth the effort? Can I volunteer without committing to the same time every week? Yes, yes, and yes!

Below, Susan Cranna, one of many wonderful NCEFT regular volunteers, tells us how she feels about the time she spends supporting NCEFT's mission of horses, hope, and healing.

### **NCEFT: How did you discover NCEFT?**

Susan: [NCEFT Horse Handler] Darrel Le Blanc is a neighbor and friend. He encouraged me to look into volunteering. I'm not really a horse person, but right away I found NCEFT to be a place of openness and inclusion that appealed to me. We live in an area where the achievement culture can be so demanding, it was nice to find a place where my professional talents are not the first and only things about me that matter.



**NCEFT: What keeps you coming to NCEFT regularly?**

Susan: I'm a very responsible person, so when I commit, I truly commit. But it's also a very motivating environment—even on days where I don't particularly feel like pulling on boots and getting outside, once I've visited NCEFT, I'm always energized. It never fails to put me in a better frame of mind. I typically side walk alongside the same children every week, so when I'm absent, that means I miss a chance to see their smiles and progress.

**NCEFT: What is the best thing about volunteering at NCEFT?**

Susan: It's such a pleasure to get to know the children and adults who come to NCEFT. They are so happy to be there and they want nothing more of you than your reassuring presence and careful attention for 30 minutes at a time. What a welcome change that is amid a typical work week. I highly recommend it!

At NCEFT, I feel welcomed as an essential part of the community. Ever since my first day, I've realized just how much of a difference I really can make in the life of a patient. Volunteering there is such a privilege. I know they are always looking for more volunteers and I really encourage everyone out there to give it a try.

**NCEFT: What is your favorite thing about interacting with the patients at NCEFT?**



*Volunteers form special connections with patients during therapy and adaptive riding sessions. NCEFT also welcomes*

Susan: One of the things I most like to tell people about the children with whom I've worked is that they are remarkably polite and agreeable. The children are surrounded by supportive adults who are cheering them on. I think they sense that. They respond so appropriately to a wide variety of people—for any child to learn to do that is such a priceless contribution to our whole community.

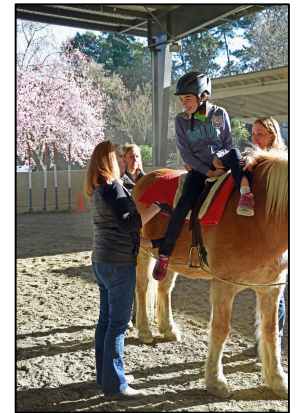
Also, many of the patients and clients at NCEFT can interact typically, and it's always nice to hear their stories and interests discussed during the sessions.

But even with those who cannot communicate as effortlessly, there is always a way to make a connection. Walking in sessions demands that you slow down and learn how to communicate on their terms. There is so much intelligence and good humor in the eyes of the kids. When you earn a good reaction from a child, it's rewarding. You get to see them blossom and that makes you blossom inside as well.

**NCEFT: What has surprised you the most at NCEFT?**

Susan: I'd have to say it is the temperament of the horses. They're gentle, tolerant animals and I enjoy being around them. It's fun when you get an unexpected lean in or a snuffle from a horse.

The other thing that has surprised me, or maybe informed me, are the sacrifices required of the families of the patients and clients and how much NCEFT means to



*Susan began volunteering weekly at NCEFT in 2015. Of the patients she says, "You get to see them blossom and that makes you blossom inside as well."*



*Horse person or not, you can volunteer. The herd of 15 very special equine healers, including a mini and two donkeys, will win your heart.*

them. I have developed such enormous respect for the caregivers whom I've met. I can imagine just how liberating it must feel for parents to see their children in such good hands that aren't their own. Even if it is just once a week, they can relax in a beautiful setting knowing their child is safe and working hard. The NCEFT staff is always thinking of ways to ensure it's a healing place for the families as well as the patients.



*Volunteer orientation is available weekly.*

**NCEFT: What would you say to encourage someone else to volunteer?**

Susan: I'd say that there is something magical about this place—it feels that way—except that it isn't magic. It's actually the result of a great deal of effort on the part of patients, therapists, instructors, volunteers, and staff. What makes it truly special for me is that I don't just passively write a check and donate money. Instead, I am encouraged to give my time. To have direct involvement with the progress of patients and clients is very rare and incredibly meaningful. I know a lot of my fellow volunteers feel the same.

The icing on the cake is that I get to carry my experiences away from NCEFT and with me into other interactions. Being there has made me aware of how fortunate I am to be able to move and communicate with relative ease. That awareness makes me so much more likely to be patient and understanding in other areas of my life. Somehow, after time at NCEFT, my worries don't seem like such a very big deal after all. When you volunteer at NCEFT, you definitely take away just as much, if not more, than you give.

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For more than 45 years, NCEFT has utilized the power of the human-horse relationship to bring hope and healing to individuals with cognitive and physical challenges. Weekly, NCEFT delivers treatment to more than 100 people of all ages, sizes, and abilities. Volunteers are vital members of the therapy team and NCEFT is always looking for dedicated, caring individuals to fill the more than 100 volunteer spots required for therapy sessions every week. NCEFT also welcomes volunteers for grounds keeping and office work and encourages groups and corporate teams to volunteer. Come work on our beautiful grounds and stay for a picnic lunch! For more information, email [volunteers@nceft.org](mailto:volunteers@nceft.org) or visit [nceft.org/giving/volunteering-at-nceft](http://nceft.org/giving/volunteering-at-nceft) to sign up. NCEFT is located on Runnymede Road in Woodside.

