

A Private Magazine for the Residents of Portola Valley and Woodside

MOUNTAIN HOME

Cover photo by Aaron Alvarez Mendoza

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Horses Offer
Hope and Healing
in Woodside

Horses Offer Hope and Healing in Woodside

By Abbie Burgess | Photos by Aaron Alvarez Mendoza

Humans and horses have been working together for thousands of years,

and the connection between them can be tremendously therapeutic. Woodside is home to a Center that's internationally recognized as a pioneer and leader of equine-assisted programs. Founded in 1971, National Center for Equine Facilitated Therapy (NCEFT) uses the profound rehabilitative power of the human-horse relationship to facilitate healing for children and adults living with physical, cognitive, and neuromuscular disabilities and mental health conditions. By harnessing the unique connection between horses and humans, NCEFT helps people "reach beyond their boundaries."

"Many people spontaneously refer to what happens at NCEFT as magical," says Executive Director Nancy Contro. "In physical and occupational therapy, we often see people make great strides that they never believed were possible." She explains that the appeal of working with a horse to achieve goals can be quite motivating, especially for children who are used to receiving services in a more sterile, clinical setting.



Chris joined the NCEFT board in 2019.

A short video produced by NCEFT in 2017, "Making Strides," shows the dramatic effect of equine-assisted therapy on a veteran who sustained a traumatic brain injury and other injuries while serving in the military. The film shows him as he arrives walking with a cane, and after 30 minutes, he is able to dismount his horse and walk confidently without his cane.

The beautiful 12-acre property of open pastures and heritage trees is nestled in the hills of Woodside. In this tranquil setting, clients, families and caregivers have the opportunity to integrate healing with the natural world.

Woodside resident Chris Iverson calls the Center one of Woodside's best-kept secrets. "I didn't know it existed until my daughter's physical therapist said hippotherapy would be great for her and I should contact NCEFT. It turns out we lived about a mile from the Center. She has been a client there since she was two."

Hippotherapy is a therapy modality that utilizes the natural gait and movement of a

horse to provide motor and sensory input. "Therapy delivered using equine movement is not horseback riding. Rather, it is intense rehabilitation that produces measurable therapeutic results and requires a physician's prescription," explains Chris, who is also an NCEFT board member. "A horse's movement engages sensory, neuromotor, and cognitive systems to promote functional outcomes such as improved core strength, balance, and sensory integration."

Chris says, "My daughter has a rare genetic disorder that impacts her similarly to Cerebral Palsy, so she has challenges with spasticity, control, and strength in her muscles," he says. "On the horse, the therapist can work multiple muscle groups in multiple axes of movement at the same time, so it's a realistic and efficient way to stretch and strengthen that mimics how the body moves." He adds, "Plus, little girls love horses, so my daughter doesn't realize how hard she is working until she is finished."

Before joining the board of directors, Chris had been volunteering his time sporadically

to the organization since 2015 when his daughter began receiving services there. A chance encounter led to his position on the board. In 2019, he and his son were visiting Folger Stable, a historic site in San Mateo that once belonged to the Folger family (of Folgers Coffee fame). Chris was wearing an NCEFT t-shirt, and the docent at the museum happened to be an NCEFT Board member. "Once she realized I was the parent of a client, she said 'You should join the Board,' and here we are," Chris remembers, adding, "It is important to the organization that a percentage of Board members are from client families, to keep the connection between NCEFT's management and the clients we serve strong."

For many families including the Iversons, NCEFT also shines as a support system. "In addition to her weekly therapy on the horse, my daughter has benefitted from physical and occupational therapy in the clinic and a number of special events that NCEFT organizes for clients and their families. Happy Trails Camp is a week-long day camp every

Continued >>>

Photo provided by NCEFT.





summer (back again now after two years!) which gives her an opportunity to do typical day camp activities and crafts with new and current friends."

The Spring Fling Riding Showcase is a favorite of riders and families alike. The riders get to show their stuff to their families in a real horse show, Chris says. "The pride in showing progress is great for the clients and it allows families to see their kids and one another, creating and strengthening friendships and bonds."

At the end of the year, the Family Holiday Party includes a visit from Santa riding in on an NCEFT horse (aptly named "Elf"), as well as cookies and cocoa, entertainment, and making cards for military troops. "It's a great way for families to connect with each other and the staff at NCEFT," Chris says. A highlight for many is the emergency vehicles—a fire truck, ambulance, or police car. "The first responders are great about lifting kids, big and small, up into trucks, letting them 'drive' and test the lights and sirens, answering the same questions a million times, and generally being awesome people."

Chris adds, "None of the families associated with NCEFT chose to be in this club, but you won't find a tighter-knit, more helpful group of people anywhere. NCEFT gives us a place to share, connect, get help, cry (there is a lot of that), rehabilitate and heal. So many people have described it as a magical place. You need to go there and see and feel it for yourself."

Woodside Elementary School's special education class took several field trips to the Center in May 2022. Chris, who is also on the board of the Woodside School Foundation, would like to see more opportunities for NCEFT to partner with the school and other community organizations. "It was great for the kids, teachers and staff. NCEFT is really an amazing place and the work they do there is inspirational."

Outside of his involvement at NCEFT and Woodside School Foundation, Chris is a residential real estate agent working out of the Woodside office of Golden Gate Sotheby's International

Realty, focusing on Woodside and the surrounding communities.

How to Help

Volunteers are the backbone of NCEFT's programs, which serve over 600 people annually. "Quite simply, NCEFT could not function without the dedicated volunteers who generously give their time to the organization. Each year, volunteers give thousands of hours of service. Every moment volunteers spend is valued, appreciated, and meaningful," says Cherie Hammer, Development Director. NCEFT welcomes individuals, organizations, and corporate team volunteers. For more information or to apply, visit: nceft.org/giving/volunteer.

NCEFT is also always on the lookout for special horses to join the herd. NCEFT horses are working athletes that must be in top condition and in excellent health. They need to possess a gentle and tolerant temperament. They must be willing to be led at the halter or guided from behind using long lines. They must want to do their job safely, carrying children as young as two, adults who are seniors, and all ages in between! Most equines are donated or leased, and all horses must pass a 45-60 day on-site trial period before acceptance. Criteria for evaluation includes: having full and complete vision, being healthy and in top condition, sound in all four legs with no history of chronic lameness, possessing good ground, stall, and handling manners, aged between 8 and 18, sized between 13 and 15 hands tall, capable of being ridden by beginners and children, comfortable with loud noises and quick movements, and accepting of novel items and environments (i.e., balls being tossed, bubbles being blown). NCEFT does not accept gaited horses. To submit your horse for consideration, please email the NCEFT Barn Manager at barnmanager@nceft.org with a brief description of your horse (age, height, breed, training background, medical issues, etc.) and 2-3 photos and/or video.

Other ways to support NCEFT include gifting real estate or a vehicle and sponsoring financial assistance to veterans, first responders or clients in need. Find out more at www.NCEFT.org.



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