

MEET



Horses as Healers

A local equine therapy program offers a new path forward for those living with early-stage dementia.

BY RACHEL ORVINO



A dementia diagnosis can be heartbreakingly not only for the nearly 7 million people living with memory loss and cognitive decline in the United States, but also for their loved ones. Connected Horse, an innovative equine therapy program that offers research-backed workshops for individuals recently diagnosed with dementia and their care partners, aims to bring hope and healing to this challenging situation.

The nonprofit was cofounded in 2017 by Moraga resident Paula Hertel, MSW, and Nancy Schier Anzelmo, MSG. The pair met as board members of the California Assisted Living Association and bring decades of experience in aging and elder care. In 2015, they partnered with Stanford University and then UC Davis on a research pilot studying the benefits of equine-guided support on stress relief and improved quality of life for those impacted by early-stage dementia. The Connected Horse programs, including an equine-themed sensory engagement kit people can use at home, build on that data.

"We wanted to take our personal passion as equestrians who love horses and have ridden our whole lives and [combine it] with supporting families and people living with this diagnosis," says Schier Anzelmo.

Adds Hertel, "We firmly believe that people shouldn't become their diagnosis; it's a piece of who they are. Yes, this is a devastating diagnosis, but there are people who are living decades with disease. How do you live your life differently but with

intention and support so you and your family members ... can continue to be connected in the community and live full lives?"

Connected Horse's free workshops are held in Nevada, West Virginia, and Northern California, including in Pleasanton. Over three Sundays with two-and-a-half hour sessions, participants take part in mindfulness and grounding activities; groom, exercise, and spend quiet moments with the horses; and enjoy sensory walks.

Young volunteer equestrians help out at the sessions. Connected Horse also does educational training to facilitate expansion of similar programs around the country.

"Horses reflect how people are feeling. They are a great tool for people to see how they and their energy show up in the world," says Hertel. "Humans and horses learn to interact with each other, and we are both better for it."

Although the program is not a cure, the benefits are manifold for both the loved one and the person living with dementia, including switching up caregiving roles, lowering stress, and emphasizing the power of nonverbal skills. Activation is another primary component, with participants subsequently taking part in more social activities, going on trips, and engaging more with their communities. "If you change your lifestyle and activate [yourself], you can slow down the progression of the disease," says Schier Anzelmo. "People can start living again instead of just taking the diagnosis and not fighting back." connectedhorse.org.