

# The Bemidji Pioneer

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## Equine Assisted Learning/Equine Assisted Psychotherapy: Horses help individuals find answers

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By: [Laurie Swenson](#), Bemidji Pioneer

For individuals struggling with self-confidence or trust issues, or groups of people who wish to improve communication and problem-solving skills, they might want to go see a horse.

Eagle Vista Ranch north of Bemidji hosted its first Equine-Assisted Learning Play Day/Open House Saturday afternoon. About 35 people attended, most of whom participated in an activity in some way with one or more of four horses, a brown former racehorse named Superman, a white horse named King, and two paints, a mare named Peaches and a male named Cracker Jack.

"This was really great," Jill Naylor-Yarger said of her experience in one of the activities. "I hope a lot of people will get to experience this."

Equine Assisted Learning/Equine Assisted Psychotherapy is an experiential form of therapy in which horses are used as tools for emotional growth and learning through collaborative effort between a mental health professional and a horse professional.

Liz Letson and Jen Laitala of Eagle Vista Ranch are both Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association-certified equine specialists. Letson expects to have her master's degree in counseling psychology in May 2012. Then, she can take on either of the two roles. The closest other opportunity for EAL/EAP is Little Falls or Mora, they said.

EAL/EAP is used to work on assertiveness, creative thinking, problem-solving skills, learning about self and others, processing feelings, behaviors and patterns; enhancing the process of growth and healing; developing and learning on multiple levels and strengthening verbal and nonverbal communication.

Unlike therapeutic riding in which a client is on a horse, EAL/EAP sessions take place on the ground. The sessions can be used along with or instead of talk therapy. The reasoning is that horses can often break through barriers that can hold up recovery.

"Horses mirror people, energy, emotions, actions," Laitala said. "They're honest. You can't lie to horses. ... You really can't hide how you're feeling from the horses."

When people see how the horses react to them, they can apply what they learn to their own lives, she said.

On Saturday, Letson and Laitala held three activities to demonstrate Equine Assisted Learning. In the first, five people were linked arm in arm, with only one arm on each side to be used to put a harness on a horse.

"The hardest part was not being able to talk," said Kathleen Driscoll, who was the right-hand side of the group, followed by Laurie Desiderato, Miriam Tell, Jill Naylor-Yarger and Amy Shimkus. Tell, designed as "the brain," was the only one allowed to speak during the exercise.

The women were able to get the harness on King, but at some point, they dropped it. They hadn't prepared for this possibility, but Tell, the brain, simply told them to pick it up and go on, which they did.

In retrospect, the participants decided they went into the situation too quickly.

"We should have taken more time and looked at the equipment and fully discuss what our approach was going to be," Naylor-Yarger said.

“It would have been a lot better if I’d known how to put a harness on,” Shimkus said.

The second activity, called Course of Life, involved eight people who had to decide what their group was, build an obstacle course and lead one or more horses through it.

“We’re all with the State of Minnesota and we’re out of work” due to the state government shutdown, Kelly Urbanek announced.

They named their obstacles (barrels, cones, logs, a bridge and stuffed toys) things like layoff notices, budget, mortgage payments, unexpected baby, job interviews, training and the way forward, with the gate labeled as the future.

The first horse, was Peaches, the only horse who had a halter on. She went through the obstacle course very quickly, but the group had more troubles with the others.

Letson wondered why no one thought to take the halter off Peaches and use it on the other horses. No one in the group had even considered it.

“We didn’t say you couldn’t take the halter off,” Laitala said. “You guys assumed that rule.”

“We make a lot of assumptions,” Letson said.

Laitala said she noticed that the group members split up early and had more success when they got back together.

“So working in concert on one horse was better than working individually,” Richard Hook observed.

“So the legislators should work together,” Urbanek said.

“They should do this course,” Julia Conlon added.

The final exercise, called “Multiple Agendas,” involved both the ring and the spectator area as people were handed slips of paper telling them what to do. One paper said to take a horse and bring it to a corner and protect it, not letting anyone touch it. This conflicted with, for example, the instruction on another sheet that said to go visit all the horses. Other people were told to be extremely extroverted; to be opinionated to the point of being obnoxious; and to be kind, make people feel good and brush all the horses.

“What really happens in life, in our places of work and places where we live, many parallels can be drawn from those exercises and activities with the horses to real-life experiences that we have,” Letson said. “It was fun to have so much participation. I’m kind of glad I closed with that activity. It pretty much allowed everybody to have a part in it.”

EAGALA is a nonprofit organization developed in 1999. For details, visit [eagala.org](http://eagala.org).

Eagle Vista Ranch offers a variety of equine-related services and activities. For more information, call 760-0656, email [eaglevistaranch@gmail.com](mailto:eaglevistaranch@gmail.com) or visit [www.eaglevistaranch.com](http://www.eaglevistaranch.com).

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