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Honors Thesis Reflection paper

How A Horse Helped Me

By Molly Hancock

When I first started my honors project, it didn't start with passion. However, the more I dove into the project, the more passionate I became and the more I learned. By the end, I was genuinely making something valuable and exciting to work on. When I first started thinking of ideas, nothing inspired me. I initially thought of doing an art project. However, it seemed wrong. Then, one day, as I was preparing to apply to grad schools, I realized I wanted to do a project surrounding my dream job. Within the last two years, I have discovered that I want to be an equine-assistant occupational therapist. I initially became familiar with the practice in high school when I started volunteering at a practice near my hometown. I had so much fondness looking back at that experience and realized as a junior in college that it was not only fun to do volunteer work but that I wanted to pursue this path. One specific moment from my time volunteering changed my mind overall. It was a young girl named Tiana. Tiana was a student who attended where I volunteered, and I was privileged to watch her health journey as she was able to walk. In my mind's eye, I can remember her standing for the first time. Since then, I knew I wanted to do something in healthcare and recapture that joy and excitement I had felt for Tiana. Little did I know I would come to study the same practice that helped Tiana walk.

As I continued school, people would ask, "What do you want to do after undergrad"? Once I mentioned that I aimed to study occupational therapy, specifically equine-assisted therapy, I was met with a lot of confusion and questions. It occurred to me that many people do not understand what this practice entails. This is what sparked my initial project. I wanted other people to know about equine-assisted therapy (EAT). The practice can help so many individuals, and it is a practice that is in desperate need of volunteer work. A key factor to know

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about EAT is its reliance on volunteers. Often, patients riding horseback need assistance staying upright on the horse; thus, the position of the sidewalker was installed; this position can also serve as a safety measure for the rider. To fulfill this critical job, many practices rely heavily on volunteer work. With this newfound passion, I wanted to create an educational tool kit that would educate individuals about equine-assisted therapy, include what it looks like, inspire people, and get people connected to volunteer.

I started by assembling my support team with new goals, inspiring me to create an educational tool kit. I was very privileged to have Professor Becky, a former professor of anatomy in an OT program, as my academic advisor for the project, and I was fortunate to have Dr. Butler as my committee member. Dr. Butler is highly educated in equine-assisted therapy, and it was a privilege to work with her and learn so much. Initially, when I started this project, I felt that I knew almost everything there was to know about equine-assisted therapy, considering I had volunteered for it and researched it before, and it was my dream job. I thought that I knew quite a lot. However, I later realized I did not know as much as I thought.

Upon meeting with Dr. Butler to discuss my research, I quickly realized that I did not know as much as I needed to. Since I last volunteered, language and practices around equine-assisted therapy had changed. For example, before this project, I had referred to equine-assisted therapy as hippo therapy, only to find out the terminology needed to be updated and switched to equine-assisted therapy. This is just one example of things that have changed since I last heard of learning about equine-assisted therapy. So many of the practices were different. Much more research had been done, and when I realized this at first, I was crushed. I felt stupid for thinking that things would stay the same. I felt ignorant for not doing more research outside of school to learn more about the practice. After all, if it was my life aspirations, shouldn't I know more? Shouldn't I have been devoted to educating myself about the topic since the beginning? Meeting with Dr. Butler and getting re-educated on the subject at first felt

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defeated. However, in my defeat, I realize I'm looking at my lack of education all wrong. This is now an opportunity for me to learn about my dream. Instead of viewing this lack of knowledge as a negative reflection, I realized that this was a great way to learn and get closer to reaching my dreams. Upon this realization, it made me even more motivated to do research and to fulfill this project. This project will create an even more meaningful honors thesis if I continue researching and educating myself and others. This project became less about educating others and more about educating myself first.

With lots of research and assistance from Dr. Butler, I learned about the new jargon and its practices. After finding all my resources, I started to design the educational toolkit I had envisioned. It took the form of a pamphlet. To start, I picked a color scheme and decorated it to be colorful and grab people's attention. I wanted to include photos; however, I realized I needed a nice enough camera, and I also needed to know if many places allowed photography of clientele. To avoid this issue, I decided to use photos already available from local practices in the Fort Collins area. Now that I had pictures and a layout with design, I started pulling out the most essential information and rephrasing it to make it understandable and brief. I chose the pamphlet because I wanted my project to educate, be accessible, interactive, summarize, reliable, and digestible. In short, I wanted a brief, summarizing, trustworthy resource to educate individuals without feeling too overwhelming, while still being easy to access. With technology, there is now an overwhelming amount of online resources, and we have lost the benefits of physical ones. This goes from hands-on experience to actual paper materials. These were the driving elements that helped me create my pamphlet and drove why I chose a pamphlet over other forms of educational toolkits.

To go along with the element of hands-on learning, since this project became more about educating myself, I started volunteering at local practices. I tried to manage school and volunteer work but felt unsuccessful. At first, I started at My Heroes at the Temple Grandin

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Equine Center and loved it. However, it was such a popular practice and didn't fit into my schedule, so I was unable to volunteer there as much as I wanted. This is when I learned about Iron Horse Therapeutic Farm. I started volunteering here once a week on Wednesdays from 8:00 a.m. to 11:00. I absolutely fell in love with this Farm. Not only does it do Occupational therapy in an equine environment, but it also does other forms of animal therapy. They have cats, chickens, and goats, a beautiful way to learn about different forms of animal therapy. It is important to note that this facility is unique because it is only made of occupational therapists. Hence, all the riding at Iron Horse Farms is equine therapy in an occupational environment. I felt so privileged to volunteer at a place that reflected my dreams.

As a sidewalker, I learned so much more from getting hands-on experience and being able to watch the occupational therapists at work. I learned so many new elements of Occupational therapy in an equine environment., and it was exciting to see that after all my research, I could identify specific skills being used. On top of this, I absolutely loved the people, the clientele, and the staff. It is also important to note that I was reminded of my love for horses. This semester, I have really been struggling with mental health, yet being on that farm brightened my day every time. It's funny how, in research, I saw articles and read about how volunteering helps not only others but yourself, and I found it to be true. I felt so much better when I could help others, and it shows that animal therapy works. I loved petting the goats and the cats, and being around horses improved my life. It shows that animal therapy can take many forms and benefit a wide range of people, and I felt very blessed that within my research, I could see the benefits of animal therapy firsthand.

Overall, this experience made me realize that I am imperfect and have much to grow and change. However, it also showed me that it is okay to need to grow and to be wrong. You can then apply this feeling of defeat to wanting to change and learn from your mistakes. Because of this attitude, I learned so much more about equine-assisted therapy and how it

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changed since I last volunteered. I got to experience firsthand what the work looks like and the benefits of being a volunteer. This whole experience reminded me how amazing it is to pursue my dreams, and it further solidified the fact that I want to be an equine-assisted occupational therapist.