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Equestrian Club Has Lamorinda Roots

By Clare Varellas



Taylor Lai with one of her horses Photo Clare Varellas

Twelve-year-old Taylor Lai knows her way around a horse. Like many Bay Area tweens, she has attended horseback riding summer camps, and having lived with them her whole life in the Mount Diablo foothills, she has grown to love the animals. But one thing Taylor knows about that not many other middle school horse lovers do is what lies beneath a horse's shiny, smooth fur coat: the horse's anatomy.

"I really want to have my career to do with horses, and I like the idea of being a vet because you get to be around the horses or the animals, and I love animals so much," said Taylor.

For this reason, the Seven Hills School student, who founded her own club for young horse lovers with her mother Shanna Gage Lai two years ago, has worked to organize a five-day summer camp for Bay Area fourth through 12th graders to focus specifically on the veterinary field, among

other horse-related sciences.

Taylor's mother, who grew up in Moraga and has been involved in caring for horses her entire life - she was president of the Moraga Juniors Horsemen's Association as a teen, and grew up riding at Henson's Arabian Center in Lafayette - used her friendships and connections to get high caliber instructors involved in the camp, such as world-renowned UC Davis veterinarian Dr. Jamie Textor, DVM, Ph.D. Textor will teach campers about the horse's anatomical system "from head to tail," showing them her work first-hand with two of the club's rescue horses under her care.

"The camp is teaching them about science, not just medicine, but science in general, and that's going to transcend even their interest in horses, because they won't all grow up to be horse owners or veterinarians," said Textor. "But hopefully it will impact them and get them excited about biology and science in general."

In addition to the three full days of instruction, the Aug. 16-20 camp features a packed schedule of hands-on activities - even including practicing a form of yoga created specifically for horseback riders. Campers will also visit various ranches and UC Davis laboratories, and learn about science and technology as well as stables and tack. Seven Hills science teacher Matt Shargel will help campers build equine robots and camera-equipped helium balloons that the group will send into space, and campers will also have the opportunity to engage their architectural creativity by drawing their dream barn or stable complex with the help of architect and author Cathy Remick, and to learn about the environmentally friendly process of converting horse manure into clean energy.

Taylor originally established the Bay Area Equestrian (BAE) Club in 2012 because she wanted to find other local kids who loved horses just as much as she does. The club currently includes 20 members in elementary, middle, and high school from Lamorinda, Walnut Creek, and surrounding towns who regularly meet to spend time with and learn more about the unique animals. Noteworthy meetings have featured visits to various stables, meet-and-greets with the Cal and Stanford equestrian teams, and even horse-themed movie nights. Shanna Lai serves on the Bay Area Equestrian Club board of directors, along with Amara Morrison of Orinda, Tiffany S. Gage of Moraga, and Emily Breach of Lafayette.

In addition to caring for rescue horses, the club contributes philanthropically by allowing

underprivileged youth to interact with horses through its Equine Access Program, contributing to equine-themed music therapy compilations, and offering its facilities to the Make-A-Wish foundation for any horse-loving patients. Unlike regular riding teams, the BAE Club celebrates any and all aspects of caring for horses. It is the love of horses in general, a love Taylor and her mom have had for as long as they can remember, that fuels the club.

"I love that when you're around horses, you have to be in the moment," Taylor's mom said. "It frees your mind so that you can just focus in on the animal."

To reserve a spot in the Bay Area Equestrian Club Veterinary Medicine Camp, contact Shanna Gage Lai at (925) 922-2908 or at baeclub@aol.com, or visit www.baeclub.org.

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