

Published April 26th, 2023

## Equine support for people affected by dementia at Xenophon

Submitted by Laura Vyda



Xenophon participants work closely with horses from the ground.

"Participants let go of unproductive interactions such as micromanaging and instead relax and go with the flow. They will find new ways to have fun and enjoy things together," said Tineke.

The workshops are the brainchild of Nancy Schier Anzelmo, MSG, and Paula Hertel, MSW, co-founders of Connected Horse, leaders in the field of equine-assisted support for people affected by dementia.

People affected by memory changes and dementia often struggle with depression, anxiety, and a sense of disconnection. Feelings of isolation and hopelessness are also common for care partners. Schier Anzelmo and Hertel recognized the value of early interventions and the importance of supporting the relationship between the person living with memory changes and their primary care partner, and they understood the power of horses.

Says Co-Founder Paula Hertel, "This program enables people to move past the rigidly defined roles of a dementia patient and a caregiver and learn to be in the moment and live again."

Alma, who attended a Connected Horse workshop with her mother, who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease, said, "As the ability of my mother to communicate reduces as her disease progresses, these lessons help me understand that there will always be connection. Verbal interaction is not always necessary for deep and meaningful interactions."

Penny Sinder facilitates Connected Horse workshops at Xenophon. "Change happens when people relax and can pay more attention to their senses. There was a gentleman who had a hard time getting out his words. It was the third session. He was hand grooming the horse, and then he looked at me, and he said, 'I think he likes it'- as clear as a bell. It still gives me goosebumps. His wife was standing on the other side of the horse. She looked up, it was a second that touched her heart. Not every experience is as dramatic, but we've had many instances where either it's an aha moment for the care partner, or the person living with dementia can see, "oh look, I can do that."

For more information about the upcoming workshop series at Xenophon Therapeutic Riding Center, Session 1: April: 26, May 3, 10 and Session 2: June: 6, 13, 20, 27 please call Xenophon at (925) 377-0871.

A little-known gem of a program for people living with memory loss or a diagnosis of dementia and their caregiving loved ones will take place in Orinda at Xenophon Therapeutic Riding Center this April and June.

Serene, scenic, and safe, Xenophon is home to eight special horses trained for therapeutic work. While it is best known for its life-changing workshops for children with a range of disabilities, the stable also offers free-of-charge workshops for people with dementia and their family care partners.

The workshops do not require previous horse experience and do not involve riding; they take place on the ground, not in the saddle.

Xenophon staff member Tineke Jacobsen describes how the program invites participants to increase sensory awareness and become attuned to the horses and, in so doing, learn new ways to relate to themselves and each other. The workshops, she says, can be transformative for participants who overwhelmingly report reduced anxiety and better engagement and connection as a result of the experience.

"People will experience connection in a way that is highly gratifying and less stressful.



Photos provided

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