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## communityspotlight



## Playing with Horses and Self Potential Center in Wilton Invites Mindful Exploration

by Nicole Miale

**A** growing body of evidence shows simply being with horses can produce positive physical effects in people. Similar to petting a dog or a cat, stroking a horse delights the senses, reduces stress and aids in relaxation. Animals live completely in the present so working with animals of any kind typically helps people become more mindful as well. “It’s easy to pay attention and be fully present when there is a 1,200 pound animal with you,” says

Carrie Brady, founder of Possibilities Farm in Wilton. “The horses recognize and reward that presence with their own interest and attention.”

Possibilities Farm is a unique resource center where clients achieve personal and professional development through partnering with horses. Looking through the eyes of horses during interactive, non-riding exercises, clients gain fresh perspectives on their strengths and challenges, build new skills, and discover possibilities for self-growth they may not have previously considered. Being outside in the farm’s serene wooded setting heightens this effect as fresh air, nature, and freedom of movement work their magic on clients’ exhausted bodies and minds.

Brady fell in love with horses when she was 4 and bought her first horse Lucky, sixteen years ago. She says she was lucky to discover the opportunity to partner with horses professionally while working as a healthcare industry executive and consultant. In all her professional roles, she saw a consistent pattern of limiting beliefs that interfered with individuals and teams achieving their goals. People and teams tended to focus on the negative, working to address problems but not really believing they had the power to succeed, and typically only considered a very narrow range of options in any situation. When Brady discovered that Stanford University and other medical schools were using horses as teaching partners, she found her calling. She pursued certification through the Equine Experiential Education Association and created Possibilities Farm.

Equine experiential education—also known as equine-facilitated learning—sessions offer more than a relaxing retreat; they are powerful opportunities for transformation. In experiential learning, people gain new perspectives through direct experience rather than cognitively-based instruction. In carefully selected non-riding activities with the horses, Brady’s clients have an opportunity to recognize their own behavior patterns and experiment with new approaches. The activities are flexible and promote maximum freedom for horses and humans to partner, explore, and discover. Each activity is followed by a period of self-reflection guided by Brady, an experienced facilitator who helps clients examine what happened with the horses and how lessons from that experience can be applied to their personal and profes-

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sional lives.

Horses have characteristics that make them well-suited to partnering in personal and professional development. Horses primarily communicate non-verbally and will automatically detect others' heart rates, respiration, and other signals of stress or relaxation. Since horses are prey animals, this finely tuned perception is a matter of survival. If one herd member detects danger, the other horses know and can respond as a group without using verbal signals which would reveal their locations to a predator. Horses use this same skill to read human body language better than other humans can.

Horses also model effective teamwork, communication, and authentic leadership, and will innovate and adapt, skills particularly relevant to high-functioning teams. Horses are unimpressed by status, title, or history and will provide non-judgmental feedback to each person or team based on their behavior in the moment. "Horses reflect back what's going on with people," Brady explains. "They are masters of attention and intention." Clients have the opportunity to see immediately how changes in their behavior will change the way a horse responds. The horses help people see their potential and the opportunities hidden in any challenge. Brady carefully selected the two resident horses at Possibilities Farm for their willingness and ability to guide humans, as well as their enthusiasm for working with people. "While all horses can do this kind of work, not all horses will," she explains. Mere is a 15-year

old female and Potato is a 19-year old male. Both were born in Europe, trained as show jumpers and competed internationally before coming to the United States. During their jumping careers, they spent years helping people quickly navigate through a course full of obstacles and successfully leap over any hurdles in their path. In their teens, Mere and Potato were each injured and no longer able to jump. Their owners didn't want to retire them to live in a herd with very little human contact so they sought a different option. At Possibilities Farm, Mere and Potato found a home where they still partner with people, helping them navigate different kinds of obstacles than before.

At Possibilities Farm, the horses guide the work. "Sometimes a horse will pick a client and sometimes a client has an instant connection with one of the horses," Brady



says. "It's not always the pairing I might expect, but it always works out." Private personal development sessions are structured around insights gained from the horses, such as the 90-minute personal development session *Swinging Open the Gates*, which focuses on setting a direction and opening any gates between you and where you want to go. Humans tend to see gates as roadblocks rather than passageways and often forget to try them but horses will frequently test gates to see if they are actually locked or if they can simply push them open and walk right through. Other sessions include *Love Yourself/ Love Your Life*, which brings the natural playfulness, self-care and joy of horses back into life and *Return to Grazing*, which focuses on staying in the present and returning to peace, even when faced with stressful situations. "Learning from horses helps humans bring the best of themselves to any situation," Brady explains. "Horses help people change their mindsets and that changes lives. It's an honor to be part of this work."

*Possibilities Farm is located in Wilton. For more information, visit PossibilitiesFarm.com. Connect with Carrie Brady at 203-210-7484 or PossibilitiesFarm@gmail.com.*

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