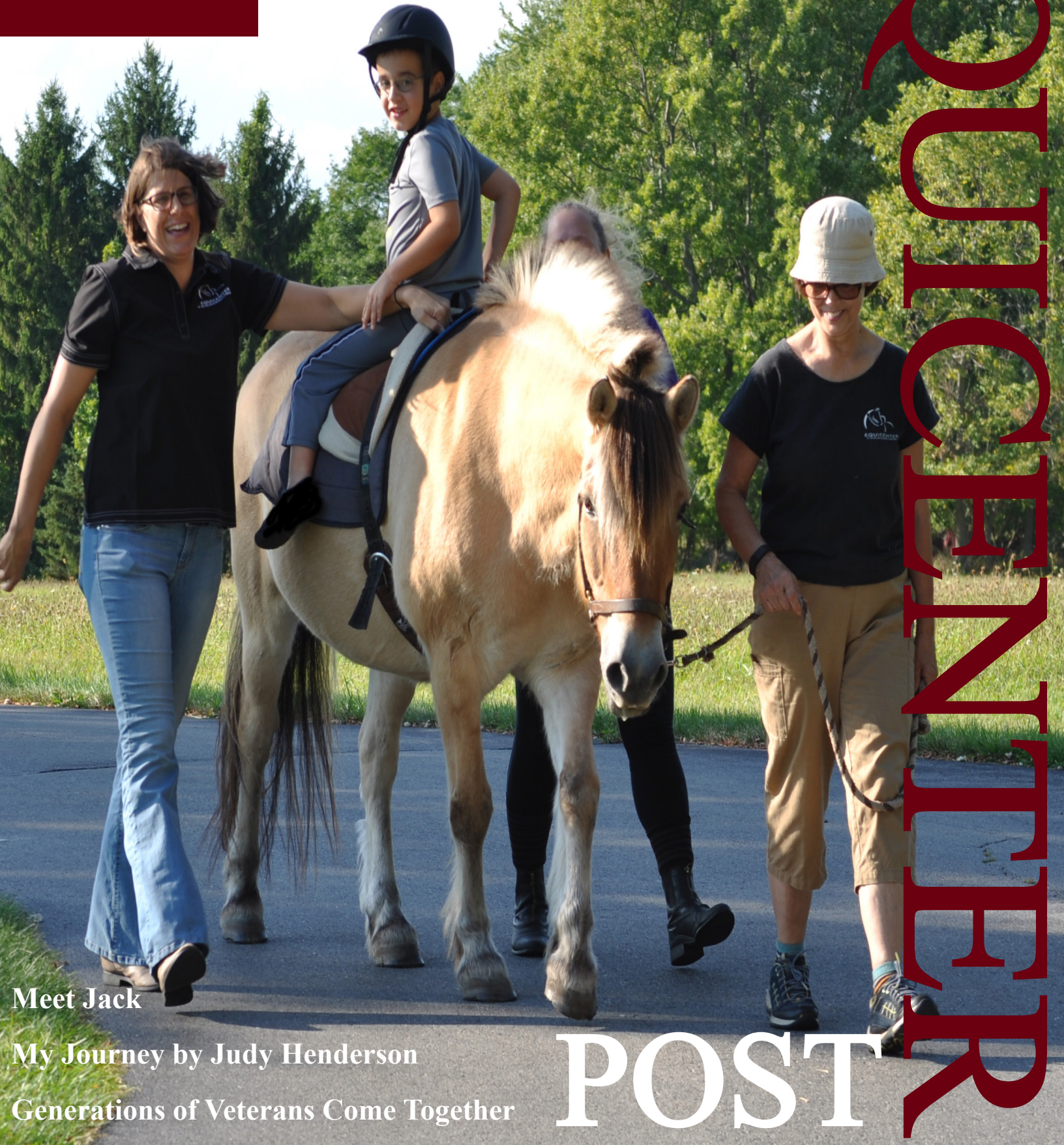




EQUICENTER  
AT THE WILLIAM & MILDRED LEVINE RANCH



EQUICENTER

POST

Meet Jack  
My Journey by Judy Henderson  
Generations of Veterans Come Together

# FOUNDERS' COLUMN

We are celebrating our 13th year of providing therapeutic programs to our community. Many of you have been along for the ride from the EquiCenter's very beginning in 2004. You have witnessed the transition from our pilot program just down the road to the diverse programming that exists here on this magnificent 200-acre William and Mildred Levine Ranch. Thanks to the vision and generosity of Bill Levine, who called the chance to acquire our current facility, "an opportunity of an eternity," we have been able to create a true therapeutic environment for a very broad range of individuals of all ages facing many diverse challenges.

The core of our therapeutic programming remains focused on Riding and Horsemanship; however, we have expanded to include Horticulture and Farming, Nutrition and Culinary Arts Classes, Canine-Assisted Therapy and Adaptive Yoga. The number of individuals who take part in EquiCenter programming continues to increase at a steady pace, with 20% of our participants having served in the US Armed Forces.

With the demand for our services continuing to grow and a perpetual waiting list, our plans include a facility expansion with a large riding complex, as well as the addition of new staff, both two legged and four. The expanded facilities will focus on a much larger heated riding arena, an outdoor riding ring, therapy rooms, offices, classrooms, and equipment and storage facilities.

While the above-described expansion is imperative to help meet the demand for our therapeutic services, we must also address our financial sustainability in order to grow responsibly. As we focus on our sustainability, we are working closely with many of you who share in our vision for a financially secure and vibrant center serving as a local, national and international model of therapeutic service. We thank you for your continued commitment and support, and look forward to having you along for the ride into the future!

## WHAT WE'RE ALL ABOUT

The EquiCenter is a non-profit center that uses a wide range of therapeutic equestrian and related programs to foster the personal growth and individual achievement of children and adults with disabilities, veterans and at-risk youth. Our current programs include Therapeutic Riding, Horsemanship, Therapeutic Horticulture, Canine Assisted Therapy, Culinary Arts Classes and Adaptive Yoga.

Our therapeutic riding programs utilize the multi-dimensional movement of the horse to provide a unique and motivating therapeutic activity. These sessions are conducted by Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship (PATH) certified instructors. Riders in our therapeutic riding program participate in structured classes to acquire horsemanship skills while developing flexibility, motor skills, balance, muscle coordination, strength, and increased self-esteem and confidence.

Participants in our horsemanship programs learn experientially by working directly with horses. In this mostly non-riding program, participants develop personal responsibility, relationship and communication skills and appreciation for teamwork, self-discipline and trust.

For more information about EquiCenter programming and ways to get involved, please contact us at [info@equicenterny.org](mailto:info@equicenterny.org) or call our office at (585) 624-7772 or our barn at (585)624-7777.



**EQUICENTER**  
AT THE WILLIAM & MILDRED LEVINE RANCH

# MEET JACK: A little boy with a huge smile.



Jack Constantino is a seven-year-old little boy who can light up the EquiCenter barn with a single smile and fill the arena with a laugh right from his belly. Not a single staff member, volunteer or horse is immune to his infectious personality or the sparkle in his eyes when he comes for his weekly therapeutic riding lesson at EquiCenter.

The Constantino family found EquiCenter four years ago when Marcy Osburn, Jack's former physical therapist and current EquiCenter volunteer, recommended therapeutic riding. Marcy thought this unique compliment to his therapy could make a big difference for Jack and the challenges he faces. Greg and Stephanie, Jack's parents, decided to give it a try and have been bringing Jack to his weekly riding lesson ever since.

Jack's parents have seen firsthand the benefits that therapeutic riding can provide children and adults with disabilities. "We attribute Jack walking for the first time (at five years old) to therapeutic riding. It has helped Jack with his core strength, stabilization, and coordination," says Stephanie, "He has come so far in the last four years and has made so many gains, it's remarkable."



Jack just loves being on his favorite lesson horse Liam, a 15 year old Norwegian Fjord gelding. He and Liam make a great pair as their playful personalities generate both mischief and success each lesson. Liam is patient and steady as Jack navigates his lessons with the help of a horse leader and sidewalkers. Jack loves to play games in his lessons and Liam is a willing teammate. Jack's current instructor, Sara, finds way to challenge Jack physically and cognitively, while keeping the lessons fun and engaging.

Therapeutic riding has allowed Jack to reach milestones his family and doctors never thought possible. We're looking forward to having Jack walk into the barn for year's to come, laughing and riding, growing and learning into a future bright with possibilities.

***"Not only do we attribute Jack walking to his therapeutic riding lessons, but also for helping to shape him into the animal loving, sweet, kind and caring boy that he is today. Words cannot express how grateful we are for the EquiCenter and it's amazing team of staff and volunteers. Without your financial and psysical support, programs like this would not be available for kids like Jack. The EquiCenter charges it's participants only a fraction of the actual cost it takes to offer it's services and wouldn't be able to change the lives of so many people without your help."***

***-Greg and Stephanie Constantino***

# MY JOURNEY:

## BY JUDY HENDERSON

***"I came to this place to help EquiCenter. I never imagined how it could turn around and save me."***

IT'S HARD TO REMEMBER HOW LONG I'VE BEEN VOLUNTEERING AT EQUICENTER. Before I started volunteering, I hadn't been around horses for 40 years as the last time I rode, the horse I was riding decided to run the last half mile back to the barn without me, leaving me face first in the mud. So when I began at EquiCenter, I never felt the need to be anything more than a side walker. In fact, I loved side walking. It gave me the opportunity to walk right beside a horse with a child up top and if that child started to slip, I was there to help. That was my job. What I did not know then, was how that child would make me feel when I looked up and saw the smile on his or her face. My extra bonus would come as I glanced over to the parents and saw the pride and pure joy on their faces as they watched their child ride.

I will never forget the day I took on an extra lesson at the last minute before I was about to head home. A new family had brought their child to EquiCenter for his first lesson. It took some time for him to get close to the horse, let alone on top of the horse. He was quite loud and very active. After much prompting and a lot of patience, we managed to get him on the horse and walked around the ring a few times. He immediately calmed down and started to smile. I walked over to his parents who were both in tears. After hugging them both, they told me that it had been a very long time since they had seen him that calm and happy. It was then that I fully realized the power this place holds and how EquiCenter affects the lives of so many.

It wasn't until a number of years later that I came to understand how important EquiCenter had become in my personal life. I like to say that EquiCenter, the people who work there, and all of the riders and horses, came back and rescued me. My life, and the lives of my family, became a roller coaster of ups and a lot more downs. My son, Patrick, began to show signs of the disease of addiction which was rampant in my personal family. This is a struggle that few families can get through and remain whole and I was determined that my family was going to make it. But word came that my younger brother, who after four stays in rehab finally beat a crack addiction, was walking his dog and was hit by a woman driving a car while texting. His dog died instantly and my brother died four days later. It would have a devastating effect



on my family. My children loved him and Patrick felt safe with him since he knew that my brother understood what he was going through. Patrick relapsed and returned to rehab. I have never seen anybody work harder to remain sober and I will always be so proud of him. But as my husband and I sat by the bedside of one of our best friends who was dying of leukemia, our son who was in a halfway house in Florida, went off the radar. Our friend passed away and after ten days of not hearing from Patrick, who would always let us know where he was, we got that terrible knock on our door and were told by two police officers that they had found our son. He had died probably seven days earlier, but since he was in his car, in a parking lot, no one had noticed.

Two days later, our house was packed with people and I whispered to my husband that I was scheduled to volunteer for a couple of lessons at EquiCenter. I slipped out of the house quietly and started my twenty minute drive to the barn. A peacefulness came over me as I was thinking of my son. I arrived at the barn not knowing that the news of my son's death had already reached the staff and before I could say anything, I was lead to the first horse I had ever walked beside, Rayne. My arms were brought up for me and placed around his huge neck. I buried my face in that beautiful horse and had the cry that I couldn't seem to get out since I heard of my son's death. A few hours later, I drove back home knowing the craziness I was about to confront. I was so thankful for those few quiet hours at the barn. I did my side walking and looked up at that wonderful, smiling child on top of that horse and I was happy. I drove home with a sense of calmness and a feeling that Patrick was going to be all right. He was done with the pain and the shame that comes with addiction and he was safe.

Sometime between the death of my brother and the death of my son, I was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis. This is a neurological autoimmune disease that affects the brain and the spinal cord and attacks and destroys the myelin sheath that protects the nerves in my brain. Once the myelin sheath is gone, the nerve is damaged and whatever that nerve does for my body is also gone. Every day is a roll of the dice and I never know what I will wake up to. To be honest, with the events that had happened since my diagnosis, I mentally put it at the bottom of my list. After Patrick's death, I began showing up at the barn a good four days a week and that was my therapy. No matter what mood I was in when I went to the barn, I finished my day there smiling, happy, and with a warm feeling in my heart. As time went by, I knew I was slowing down. I couldn't keep up with kids who were trotting, summers became difficult because the heat was overwhelming, and other things were happening in my body that people just could not see. But I kept side walking because that's what made me happy. The staff knew what was going on and never held me back, but always jumped in to help when they knew I was having trouble keeping up. What a gift they gave me by allowing me to continue to work with the kids.

It was after my fourth relapse that it occurred to me that I really did have a disease, and therefore a diagnosis, which meant I could ride here at EquiCenter. Last fall, forty five years since that horse threw me to the ground, I began riding again. My love is a horse named Star. She seems to understand that I can get confused with my directions at times and she is so patient when it takes me a while to get her bridle and saddle on. I knew riding would be good for my muscles, but never knew how challenging it would be for my brain. But it is a wonderful challenge, and I am up for it. I am not only trotting, but I have trotted while riding bareback and I have not fallen off yet!

My life is great. My daughters, husband, and I have learned to understand the disease of addiction. We know how hard Patrick worked and we also know that we, as a family, did everything we could to back him up. But most of all, he knew how much we loved him and we knew how much he loved us. Our family has remained whole and even closer if possible.

EquiCenter has taken me full circle and kept me safe during a time in my life that I could have been crushed. I am still a side walker but now I choose who I walk along with due to my physical limitations. No matter what horse you are walking with or what smiling face is looking down on you from the top of that horse, I get that same feeling as I did some eight years ago when I started volunteering. It is the feeling of warmth, joy, and knowing that I am doing something good and important. And the kids are teaching me that if they can get on top of that horse and smile with happiness, then so can I.

Judy Henderson



# FUNDRAISING EVENTS

*Our fundraising events were a huge success in 2017. Thank you to all our sponsors, participants, volunteers, EquiCenter families and staff who have made them possible!*

## PADDLES FOR SADDLES

### MIDTOWN ATHLETIC CLUB\*

At the beginning of March, Midtown Athletic Club hosted the 6th annual Paddles for Saddles paddle tournament, which is now the largest paddle tournament in the area. Presented by Calvary Automation, the paddle tournament brought together players from the Greater Rochester area to support the EquiCenter with a weekend full of paddle tennis, live music, food and prizes. Over \$33,000 was raised, which directly helps fund EquiCenter's life-enhancing therapeutic programs.



## MILITARY FAMILY DAY

On August 28, EquiCenter hosted its largest Military Family Day to date with over 100 adults and kids joining us for an afternoon of program demonstrations, games, pony rides, lunch and music. EquiCenter is proud to have been able to bring so many military families together to enjoy the EquiCenter and everything it has to offer.



## MANE EVENT



On October 7, with the help of our presenting partner, Midtown Athletic Club, nearly 250 guests enjoyed the fifth annual Mane Event. The beautiful evening brought perfect weather and began with the sounds of Significant Other drifting over the crowd while they enjoyed therapeutic riding demonstrations, an exciting silent auction and the company of friends. This was followed by a delicious farm-to-table harvest dinner prepared by chef, Jason Carson and Label 7 Napa Eatery and Bar, while hearing three moving stories from our participants and families. Our generous guests, sponsors, staff and volunteers helped us raise \$140,000 to support EquiCenter programming and we are so honored by the support shown to EquiCenter for the event and throughout the year.

### GUYS NIGHT OUT MIDTOWN ATHLETIC CLUB\*

After one rain date delay, the sun was out and the weather perfect for the Guys Night Out event, hosted by Midtown Athletic Club and presented by S&T Bank, on August 10. Vendors and sponsors joined the men on the Midtown pool deck and lawn for games, refreshments, raffles, and a live auction that raised \$10,000 to support EquiCenter.



## TEE OFF FOR A CAUSE

The EquiCenter and presenting partner Can-Am Consultants, Inc. teamed up this year for the 9th Annual EquiCenter Golf Classic on June 5 at Locust Hill Country Club. A few scattered storms didn't deter our golfers and the tournament raised \$35,000 for EquiCenter's therapeutic programming.



## HORSE SHOW

On June 3, participants, families, volunteers, staff and sponsors gathered around the EquiCenter's outdoor riding arena to see EquiCenter students demonstrate their riding accomplishments. It was a beautiful day and the positive and celebratory atmosphere left all who attended with a sense of pride in what EquiCenter students are able to achieve in riding lessons all year long. Everyone gathered under a tent sponsored by Best of Times Financial Planning and enjoyed a barbecue lunch sponsored by Jackson Welding and Gas. The event also served as our Volunteer Appreciation Day, as volunteers are an integral part of EquiCenter and its successes and the horse show would not have been possible without them.



# IT'S ALL ABOUT THE HAY:

## STRIDES TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY

It is no secret that New York is graced with long winters and short summers and as much as we love the sight of our herd grazing on green grass all summer, we know how important it is to produce enough hay to feed them through the winter. Since the EquiCenter moved to the beautiful William and Mildred Levine Ranch in 2010, it has been the hope to establish a hay program that fully sustains our herd solely with EquiCenter resources. This hay program will allow us to be self-sufficient in using our fields and equipment to feed our horses and continue to help bring funds back to EquiCenter by selling hay that is not needed for our herd. This past summer brought huge strides toward realizing that sustainability and we are proud to have harvested a hay crop that will support our 25 horses all winter long.

The hay program began several years ago when EquiCenter converted the cornfields on the property to hay fields, dually providing a way to feed our herd and facilitating better stewardship of the land, as hay fields are more conducive to water management than cornfields. The biggest leap was made with the purchase of EquiCenter's own hay equipment at the beginning of this past summer, including a mower, tedder, baler and rake. The purchase of this equipment gave EquiCenter the freedom to make hay during the critical weather breaks of the season, without having to rely on the schedule of hired farmers. The purchase of the equipment happened during the beginning of hay season, setting the timeline on our hay harvest behind right from the start. To add to that setback, the weather of this past hay season was a challenge for even the most seasoned hay operations, as frequent rain left fields too wet to enter with equipment or without enough time for cut hay to dry. EquiCenter's staff and volunteers navigated the difficult season with some helpful advice from local, experienced farmers, and were able to harvest, bale and store the hay crop with minimal setbacks for this first year of independent harvesting.

As with any new program, it took some trial and error to find the most efficient and effective way to harvest and transport the hay with the new equipment. Our hay team has identified a few areas where the hay program still needs to be improved, including the addition of a storage building for our new equipment and for the hay itself. The efficiency of the operation would also be greatly improved by the addition of a couple of basket hay wagons which would allow the kicker mechanic on our baler to toss bales directly into a wagon, versus manually picking the bales up off the field. These additions would greatly improve the operation, however, despite the setbacks and challenges our hay team faced this year, we have established the foundation for a program that will serve EquiCenter well for years to come.

It cannot be said enough how important a large and quality supply of hay is to EquiCenter's herd, and the efforts of staff and volunteers to fully utilize our resources for the hay harvest were remarkable. The willingness of EquiCenter's supporters to jump in to a hard job and work until it was done was critical to the success of this year's hay program. We are grateful for everyone's efforts and are excited for the future as we continue towards sustainability!



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# TOM CRITELLI: HELPING MAKE LESSONS POSSIBLE

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When Tom Critelli met EquiCenter founders, Jonathan and Stacy Friedlander, at the Paddles for Saddles tournament hosted by Midtown Athletic Club in 2011, none of them

knew that they shared an equestrian connection. Tom had come as a paddle tennis player, not as a “horse person”, but it only took a few minutes for the conversation to shift to horses. They quickly discovered they shared connections with people in the equestrian community and knew many of the same horses. From that conversation, Tom decided to check out EquiCenter. He has since become one of its most dedicated volunteers and has given his time and talents to EquiCenter in immeasurable ways.

Tom has an equestrian background steeped in the thoroughbred racing world, and his experience has made him a huge asset to the program. He began working for Sky Acres, a thoroughbred breeding and racing farm, at the young age of 12 and stayed on to eventually take over as the Farm Manager. Tom spoke with pride of one memorable horse he worked with during his time at Sky Acres, Hail to Sky, who was named Horse of the Year in 1998 at Finger Lakes Racetrack. Although Tom eventually decided to leave the racing industry as a career, he came away with a treasure that he would cherish for years to come, an off track thoroughbred mare named

Unlimited Warranty. Tom shared many happy years with “Limit” in their new careers away from the track, and the connection he shared with her is obvious every time he speaks of her.



Tom is not a stranger to volunteering. He refereed soccer games for the Special Olympics and found there to be something special about all the people involved on the sidelines, who were helping the game to “happen” for players. We are very lucky to have Tom volunteering in our barn, performing tasks that make therapeutic riding lessons so beneficial to our participants. He is a patient and caring lesson assistant, both as a side walker and a horse leader. He frequently volunteers at special events and shares his passion for EquiCenter by introducing others to our programming. Tom also volunteers as an exercise rider, helping our horses to maintain both their fitness and training. Volunteers are often asked if they have a favorite horse and Tom would say, if pressed, that Autumn, a young, sometimes sassy, but social, draft cross mare captures his heart.

Tom’s experience and passion for horses combined with his eagerness to help our participants has made him an invaluable member of the EquiCenter volunteer force. Without the help of dedicated volunteers like Tom, EquiCenter could not offer its life changing therapies and we are thankful for Tom and each volunteer who helps our lessons to happen all year long.



# “MISSION MUSTANG”

## 540,000 Veterans with PTS and 48,000 Mustangs in Captivity

**O** veterans are facing an epidemic, one that is leading 22 veterans to commit suicide each day. There are 540,000 veterans in the United States that have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress and countless more who have yet to be diagnosed with this invisible wound of war. The toll of war leaves our soldiers with physical and emotional scars deeper than most can imagine, and it is an ongoing fight to help these men and women find ways to heal.

While our veterans fight to build new lives after combat, another American symbol is fighting a battle to find a place in a changing world. The American mustang has been a symbol of freedom throughout our nation's long history, representing resiliency and strength to many Americans. As the open land continually shrinks, these horses are left with less room to live and thrive. The Bureau of Land Management has been essential in preserving the mustangs and while 50,000 horses continue to roam free, there are 48,000 horses in holding facilities waiting for a second chance. To find these horses homes, they must be “gentled” and given an opportunity for a meaningful life.

EquiCenter is honored to be part of an initiative to bring the two causes together and to help find a solution for both through one program. EquiCenter has been selected by the Bureau of Land Management to help lead a national pilot program that will address the needs of both America's veterans and mustangs. “Mission Mustang” will strive to pair veterans battling their own

high anxiety, hyper vigilance and lost feelings with wild mustangs experiencing the same out of place, anxious feelings from being in a new, captive environment. Veterans will work along with professional mustang trainers, to “gentle” the mustangs to help them find homes and these same men and women will hopefully find themselves along the way. Working together will give veterans and horses a chance to save each other.

EquiCenter has been preparing for the arrival of three wild mustangs by pursuing the installation of a covered round pen and “mustang ready” fence panels, a minimum of six feet high in all mustang living areas. The round pen will give program participants and trainers a place to work with the mustangs through all types of weather and in all seasons. Beyond the mustang program, this space will give EquiCenter an additional area to conduct horsemanship lessons, horse training, riding lessons and more. The round pen will be an integral part of “Mission Mustang” and all of our therapeutic equestrian programming.

EquiCenter is excited about the possibilities and opportunities the “Mission Mustang program” will bring to our veterans and participants and to veterans across the country. This national pilot program stands to make a difference in the lives of countless veterans and mustangs and EquiCenter is proud to be a part of the foundation of this program.



# GENERATIONS OF VETERANS COME TOGETHER AT EQUICENTER

In 2009 EquiCenter began to provide services to military veterans in response to a need within our community. Service members returning home from military duty desperately needed a place to heal and the EquiCenter was an obvious choice. The response to serve after the attack on 9/11 was very similar to the response made by Americans sixty years earlier, when the United States entered World War II. However, there was one significant difference- World War II veterans went to war and then returned home to their families. Today only 1% of our population participates in active military duty, leading to the necessary deployment of our service members on an almost annual basis as they fight America's longest war. These repeated rotations to some of the hardest places in the world can take a toll with injuries that can be physical but are increasingly invisible- the moral injury of war.

For veterans coming to EquiCenter, horses are the effective healers they need. Today we serve almost 100 participants in our therapeutic riding program in each of six sessions throughout the year and 20% of those participants are veterans who have served in the active duty theaters of WWII, Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq. Air Force Veteran Nathan Bush described his experiences here as life altering, "When I found EquiCenter last July, I was struggling to find connection, community and purpose. After participating in the programs here, I felt hope that life could be meaningful again. EquiCenter was, and is, the medicine for my wounds- both seen and unseen." Often the most touching moments in the barn are between veterans like Nathan and their horses. Equally as gratifying is the support we witness between fellow veterans, helping each other to overcome the wounds of war.

Ralph Edwards, a good friend to the EquiCenter and an active volunteer, served in the Army Air Corp as a young man during WWII. He came to EquiCenter almost 3 years ago at the age of 89 after the death of his beloved wife, Ruth. Ralph worked horses on a farm growing up and came to help as a volunteer, wanting to work with horses again and finding the added bonus of being among other veterans. Each Friday Ralph comes to help out, grooming horses for morning lessons and training. Without fail, staff, volunteers and veterans all spend time with Ralph throughout the course of the morning, enjoying his easy conversation and charm. The horses shine under his care and our veteran participants appreciate the kind words from someone who remembers war, duty and service just like themselves. Our barn brings veterans together who played vital roles in a number of conflicts throughout our nation's history, the Greatest Generation meeting the veterans of post 9/11 all surrounded by the comfort and ease our therapeutic horses provide.

Ralph is now 92 years old, and he still comes every Friday to lend a hand at EquiCenter. Over the last three years, he has shared EquiCenter with many of his friends from his senior retirement residence at Cloverwood, bringing them out to see the place where he wears the title of Senior Groomer. One particular friend, Wallace Wagner, was particularly moved by the work happening at his friend's favorite place. Wally, like Ralph, was a World War II veteran. He noted the organized barn and well kept horses, but more importantly, noted the difference it was making in the lives of the children and adults with disabilities, at risk youth and veteran participants that EquiCenter serves. During a visit he watched a lesson with one of our youngest riders, a little girl with special needs. Wally was so impressed by her new found ability to sit up while she rode, despite not even knowing how to walk yet, and from then on, EquiCenter had officially captured his attention. Seeing the difference that riding lesson made for that little girl, and the difference that EquiCenter was making for his fellow veterans, prompted Wally to support the EquiCenter's mission in a big way. Wally passed away on December 3, 2016. In his will, he left EquiCenter a donation that will ensure our participants continue to conquer their challenges. Wally and Ralph's efforts and generosity on our behalf generated support and funding for EquiCenter that will make a difference for years to come. EquiCenter is proud to provide a therapeutic setting for the men and women who have served our country. Our farm, fields and barn have become a place to heal from the injuries of war, and EquiCenter will continue to have a lasting impact for veterans and all our participants thanks to people like Ralph Edwards and Wally Wagner.



Nathan Bush with EquiCenter's Buddy



Ralph Edwards grooming Buddy



Wallace Wagner (2nd from left) during WWII

# MEET BENJI

The third time is always the charm.

Not every horse is a great fit to be a part of the important work that is happening at EquiCenter. Some horses are too fast or too sensitive for our riders as they learn how to balance and cue their mounts. Some horses prefer not to be crowded by the lesson team volunteers that help our riders succeed and some horses are just a one person horse. When Benji first came to EquiCenter to be considered as a potential therapy horse, the staff evaluated him and thought that he was not quite suited to join our therapy program. But Benji kept finding his way back to our barn. All he needed was a little bit of time to convince everyone at EquiCenter just how much he could do for our riders and that he was exactly what we needed.

Benji is a Clydesdale cross gelding, standing a towering seventeen hands tall. This big bay horse is now 22 years old and joined the EquiCenter six years ago after his third trial period. Benji had enjoyed a successful eventing career with owner, Gunther Jacobson, competing up to the preliminary level. For a horse to compete up to this level, they need to be well trained. The training Benji has makes him more sensitive and attuned to his rider's cues, which is great for a competition horse and a little tougher for a therapy horse. Benji is sensitive to movements and shifts of balance from his rider. Initially this was a concern of EquiCenter staff as they considered him to join the herd, however, this is actually what makes him such a great addition. Benji has the ability to teach our independent, more advanced riders the finesse of riding a horse with more finely honed skills. Our participants learn how to cue Benji with small movements, improving their coordination and muscle control. Instructor in-training, Courtney Thompson, spoke about the advantage of teaching with a horse like Benji, "He is intuitive to the riders needs and when asked correctly, helps riders achieve their independent riding goals. He can make them feel so accomplished because their small cues will elicit the correct response."

Benji shares a very special bond with his owner, Gunther, and has formed some other close bonds during his time at EquiCenter. He seems to pick select people to connect with, which reaches our participants on an emotional level. The teamwork involved in riding is so important, and Benji gives our participants a chance to experience the connection between horse and rider in a way that makes riding even more special. Benji's sensitive nature encourages our participants to focus as they work with him, which challenges them cognitively and helps them to recognize the subtle signals that he gives.

Benji is not a traditional therapy horse. He is not "bombproof", and he would rather not play games in lessons. He's polite to everyone but only affectionate to some. He tolerates mistakes but shines when a rider learns his cues. At first try, and second, therapeutic riding didn't seem like the right job for him. But on the third try, EquiCenter saw what Benji had been trying to tell them all along. He is perfect for this job. He is exactly what the EquiCenter needed to challenge and inspire our more independent riders. We are so thankful to Gunther and the Jacobson family for sharing all of Benji's talents with us as he has given our participants the chance to shine with accomplishment.



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