More than Physical Therapy; True Relationships, True Improvements
An Ethnography on the True Strides Therapeutic Horse Riding Subculture

PREFACE

My heart for people has earned me the nickname “Mom” amongst most of my friends. As a determined girl from rural Minnesota with a growth mindset, caretaker personality, and high value in community, I thrive on relationships. I am constantly striving to be an example of God’s love to those around me. This drive to serve has sent me in many different directions through several kinds of school activities and volunteer opportunities.

I inherited my caretaking attitude from my mom. My mom has worked with disabled students for the past 20 years and finds great joy and purpose in these relationships. Based on her passion, I am assuming the workers at True Strides will be genuinely invested in their clients like my mom. I have also experienced this devotion to care in the leaders of one of my favorite activities: Bison Connection.

A program unique to my high school, Bison Connection is an opportunity to form relationships among students in our building with special physical, mental, or educational
challenges. Through events like bowling, gift exchanges, and crafts, we create bonds with students outside of our mainstream educational experience.

When I first joined two years ago, I was initially intimidated by my Bison Connection friends. I felt my usual confidence slip into a “reserve mode,” feeling awkward in conversation and uncomfortable with silence. However, after spending more time doing activities with these students, I’ve discovered their valuable hearts. Each student is welcoming and outwardly caring towards myself and the wonderful staff we are privileged to have. The students I know in Bison Connection are also very honest with little to no filter. They speak their minds without thinking twice, allowing for a truly unvarnished relationship. Based on these experiences, I am expecting the clients at True Strides to be honest and welcoming, and for our interactions to become natural with time.

Through conversation with some of my Bison Connection friends, I’ve heard plenty of talk on therapy— including the popularity of hippotherapy. I know hippotherapy includes both therapy and horses, but I’m not sure how these are connected; how does riding a horse affect a person’s body and mindset?

Luckily, I found out my friend, Gabby Coudron, works at an organization that practices hippotherapy called True Strides. As eager as I am to understand how this therapy works for each client’s physical health, I am also curious to see how it impacts their mental health through their interaction with the staff and horses.
BACKGROUND INFORMATION

True Friends is a non-profit organization focused on “providing life-changing experiences that enhance independence and self-esteem for children and adults with disabilities.” True Friends has five camp locations; Camp New Hope, Camp Eden Wood, Camp Friendship, Camp Courage North, and Camp Courage. Through these five camps all based in Minnesota, True Friends reaches over 4,000 adults and children with disabilities annually. True Strides is a hippotherapy program affiliated with the True Friends organization located at Camp Courage in Maple Lake, Minnesota. With a mission statement that says, “Where therapy is fun, goals are reached, and dreams become reality…” their dedication to serving others and desire for their wellbeing is evident (“True Strides Homepage”).

Therapeutic riding, also known as hippotherapy, is a physical, occupational, and speech-language therapeutic strategy that utilizes the unique three-dimensional movement of the horse that cannot be reproduced in the traditional clinic setting. “The horse's unique walk transfers variable, repetitive and rhythmic movement to the client, which provides sensory input to the brain and nervous system.”

The natural stride of the horse combined with the companionship of the animal provides many benefits. According to The Children’s TherAplay Foundation, Inc., these benefits include increased muscle tone, strength, and skills; improvements in range of motion, body control, and coordination; and advances in the limbic system functions related to arousal, motivation and attention (“Hippotherapy”).

Therapeutic riding can be dated back to 17th century, however the form as currently practiced was developed in the 1960s. It began in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland as an
adjunct to traditional physical therapy. In 1992, the United States formed the American Hippotherapy Association (AHA). Since its inception, “the AHA has established official standards of practice and formalized therapist educational curriculum processes for occupational, physical and speech therapists in the United States” (“FAQs”). The population of hippotherapy is growing; according to the Minnesota Horse Council, there are 39 other self-reported Therapeutic Riding programs (excluding True Strides) in Minnesota as of April 2014 (“Minnesota Horse Council”).

OBSERVATIONAL DATA AND ANALYSIS

27 February 2016 (8:45 p.m.-11:15 p.m.); 16 March 2016 (3:15 p.m.-4:45 p.m.)

The entrance to the True Strides building is only reached after maneuvering windy roads and multiple “HORSE CROSSING” signs. Initially, the air is filled with the inevitable smell of horse manure. This smell dissipates in the lobby, with the calming “wood cabin” atmosphere enveloped by innumerable photos of presumed clients. The walls are lined with motivational posters, such as one stating “No whining, no complaining, absolutely no frowning, only hugs, smiles, and fuzzy feelings are allowed…”. The family amenities in the lobby that include baby toys and couches also contribute to the high level of comfort.

This laidback, family-type atmosphere is continued throughout the staff. Each worker wore jeans with stereotypical old-west style boots. Along with their matching black vests, workers wore various shirts underneath. Some wore college sweatshirts under their vests while others wore Nike dry-fit long sleeves. It is an accepted behavior to wear whatever you want to work here, but it is expected all workers wear their black vests and boots.
The hallway connecting the lobby to the arena is plastered with hanging photos of their 11 horses, upcoming community opportunities (including a dance marathon), and a therapy schedule for the current month. Their intention of connecting to clients and their families beyond therapy sessions is evident through their display of community events and effort to communicate.

Walking inside the arena an abrupt cool air collides with the brisk atmosphere lit by numerous ceiling lights. A large oval filled with sand—the place where the clients ride the horses—is surrounded by a raw wooden fence and a few sets of bleachers.

True Strides places a heavy emphasis on safety. A crucial artifact to the True Strides community is the back wall of the arena filled with three rows of helmets. Each helmet is a different shape and size, and holds its own unique design. Because True Strides stresses the importance of safety and cares about the wellbeing of their clients, they created a fun way to get clients excited about their helmets by personalizing them. For example, some helmets are pink with flowers decorated on the sides while others are navy blue or camouflage.

The first client of the day was a young girl named Devon. She appeared to be around eight years old with giant pink glasses that matched her enormous smile. Devon’s giggles echoed throughout the arena as soon as she saw her favorite horse, Glitterman. Glitterman has an aura of grandness and a shiny dark coat. Contradicting this majestic appearance is his hair that has been braided into little braids with random, colorful ponytails. Devon’s enthusiasm throughout her session was met by the enthusiasm of the staff—her giggles weren’t the only source of laughter in the room.

Devon was very talkative with the staff members: “Let’s go, let’s go, let’s go, go, go!”; “Wow Nathan you are so fast!”; “Look at me!” Devon was also observant and personal with the
staff members. “Jade, you got a haircut!” Devon demonstrates a desire for the staff’s approval and values their opinions and friendship. Her comfort level here is strong and highly susceptible to the verbal and physical responses from the staff.

The typical session for a client at True Strides begins with laps around the arena on their favorite horse. This ritual provides the client with consistency, which proved vital to their engagement. Two workers hold the client’s ankles for safety reasons, and another sits behind the client in order to provide additional supportive safety precautions. The woman supporting Devon is an older-looking woman with dyed blonde hair and a made-up face named Shari. She led the session with Devon, indicating to the other staff members the content and pace of the lesson. Shari’s assertive yet friendly interactions with the other staff members established her role as the boss. Her wrinkled face from years of smiling matched the endearing quality to her voice as she communicated with Devon.

After the ritual warm up laps, the lesson becomes tailored to the client. For Devon, this lesson circled around growing strength in her arms.

“Soft muscles, Devon,” said Shari. Shari is making an extra effort to relate her goals to Devon, accommodating for the educational gap with jargon that fits the senses of the body. Shari began the first few laps holding Devon’s arms up for her, but slowly had Devon try holding them up on her own to gain strength. This goal reflects the overall desire of client independence and increased functionality.

Each time Devon completed a task, such as holding her arms up for a whole lap, she was constantly met with positive reinforcement. “Good job, Devon!” The staff praised every step she
took. The clients react positively towards this encouragement; the combination of their respect for the staff and desire for their approval leads to increased personal success.

I noticed a young mother intently watching her presumable son’s session. She smiled each time he was able to pass the beach ball back and forth with one of the staff members, and laughed along with him when he missed. Jenny Klien, the mother of client Jamison, has utmost trust in the staff and community here. “From day one I felt super comfortable here, and that’s important to me as a mom.” Mrs. Klien hugged her arms around her stomach and grinned while explaining Jamison’s constant excitement for his horse therapy. “He never shuts up about it! I have to tell him ‘only five more sleeps until horse therapy!’” This organization makes a difference in the families of the clients as well, creating a secure and exciting environment for their loved ones.

Mrs. Klien wasn’t the only person in the arena with joy in her eyes. A youthful staff member working with another client was radiating cheer. Her eyes were constantly involved in her client, and her smile looked too easy to be forced. I noticed something unfamiliar about her arm; she held it at an awkward angle and kept her hand constantly hidden away inside her pink Columbia jacket. She introduced herself as Jade, and informed me that she began coming to True Strides for therapy herself as a child. Although she never told me what the therapy was for, I can assume it had something to do with her arm.

“Everyone at True Strides was so inspiring– I started working here as soon as I could,” she laughed. Jade’s role change from client to staff member displays the strength of not only the physical therapy aspect, but of the relationships built there.
Jade explained they do just that at True Strides—more than physical therapy. They strive for lifelong learning as well. Back when Jade was a client, she struggled to memorize all the states in America for her upcoming test. “Shari taught me ‘The 50 States’ song and we would sing it while we rode the horses.” Her face lit up as she discussed the other extents staff members go to in order to reach certain clients. They utilize each client’s “outside of therapy” connections to relate to their physical therapy. “[Hayden] likes Angry Birds, so we made him an Angry Birds Live course to help him with his hand eye coordination.”

The staff-client relationships are strong here, but so are the staff-staff relationships at True Strides. Inside the staff lounge there were empty cinnamon roll cans and dirty dishes in the sink. Jade explained that, as a staff, they like to share food each morning before clients come and go over the “game plan” for the day. They also share lunch together each day in a potluck style. Their mindset as a staff is cohesive and idealistic. “We are The Dream Team!” Jade exclaimed.

The staff has more traditions than just sharing food. They also create wooden necklaces with their names carved on one side, and a decoration of something they’re interested in on the other. For Jade’s necklace, this was a tennis racquet. These artifacts display their effort to grow community not only to their clients and their client’s families, but amongst their fellow staff members as well.

One crucial member to the staff’s cohesiveness at True Strides is Gabby Coudron. Observing Gabby in the staff lounge, she interacted with each staff member and took the reins in introducing me, making sure everyone was comfortable. Her leadership in the staff reflects her role as a positive leader and key component in their close-knit atmosphere.
Gabby appears very stereotypical horse-rider with her wavy brown hair and dark eyes to match. She has worked here since this summer and has seen the power of relationships here through the staff. “They look for people [to hire] who get along with everyone. You can tell we are all friends,” she smiled. Gabby explained that hanging out with the staff members off the clock was a natural occurrence. This includes riverboat tours, getting their nails done, dinner dates, and going to events like the rodeo. “We’re all really close and we do a lot together.”

When working with clients, Gabby was always serving those around her with a smile on her face. It is obvious she cares deeply for each individual client through the pride shining through her face when a client makes a step forward in improvement. “The best part of working here is working with the kids and seeing them get excited. I had a job before— it was just a job though. Now I cannot wait to go to work!”

True Strides is not your average work space or your common therapy session. A critical aspect of their clients’ success is what makes hippotherapy unique: the horses. These horses play an essential role in the physical and mental improvement of each client.

Molly Johnson, mother of a client named Joe, believes the difference is in the horses. Her son Joe went to regular occupational therapy for years, yet still wasn’t potty trained by age 6 and dealt with constipation issues. “No matter how much occupational therapy we did, we couldn’t get his tummy muscles to work,” she said passionately. “[With] six weeks of riding he was completely potty trained and off his constipation pills.” Mrs. Johnson also senses changes in her son’s social skills and confidence after hippotherapy at True Strides. “He’s a totally different kid and this is only his seventh session!”
The warmth of the horse and the companionship it exudes offers a unique relationship that cannot be reciprocated in occupational therapy. Hayden, another client who attends regular sessions at True Strides, has a special connection with his favorite horse. “Hayden loves Lady. He has an emotional connection with her or something!” Jade said. She pointed out Lady, the horse, and explained that each client calls the horses by different nicknames. “[Hayden] always comes in here and calls Lady by funny nicknames, like ‘Where’s my Lady?’ or something!”

Although the clients may have their favorite horses, the staff members aren’t allowed to show their favoritism. “We treat the horses as we want them to treat us,” Jade said. “We can’t kiss horses in front of the other horses.” This respect is reciprocated in the treatment of their clients: True Strides provides each client with their undivided attention, complete love, and mutual respect. The staff doesn’t have favorites with their clients, as they care for them all the same.

Not only do the horses offer unique physical and emotional benefits to the clients, but they also provide a rare setting that creates pure relationships. The isolation from the constant distraction and switch-tasking of today’s modern world allows for genuine relationships to form. For instance, conversations are held constantly while staff members lead the horses the clients are riding. It is not uncommon to hear “How was your day?” and “What did you learn in school?” scattered throughout each session. The raw environment combined with the slow and natural pace of the horse allows for time to slow down and true relationships to form.
CONCLUSION

Upon leaving my final observation, I found myself with my back turned standing in a doorway. Suddenly, a child ran up to me and hugged me from behind. I was startled to see they were the arms of Joe—a client I had observed earlier. I embraced him back, and the impact of the moment hit me as he smiled goodbye and walked back over towards his mom. Joe was reflecting the unvarnished love he has learned from those around him: especially from the staff and horses here at True Strides.

Although some people may view hippotherapy as simply a way to become physically stronger, the people at True Strides have demonstrated it is much more than that. True Strides has taught me the difference having compassion, slowing down, and being intentional in relationships makes in the lives of those around us. Clients here are so well loved that they spread this kindness through their own lives and the lives of those around them. As the students have treated me in Bison Connection, this candid love from the clients and staff members at True Strides reflects exactly what their organization cherishes: truth. True relationships, true improvement, and true joy.

I have also learned that forming relationships with an emphasis on attitude makes a huge difference in a therapy setting. This can be applied to all areas of life: connecting with people on a personal level requires the same driven intention of the staff at True Strides.

My assumption of the intent care each client would receive was exceeded beyond my expectations. Through examples like Jade and Gabby, there are many of staff members actively involved in each client and passionately committed to their physical and emotional wellbeing.
My assumption that the clients would be accepting to those around them was also confirmed through the honest hug I received from Joe.

I believe there is something for everyone to take away from the actions of True Strides. If we are being honest, we all need slow-down therapy. In this world full of technological distractions and stressful expectations, it becomes easy to hold all social contact through the sole source corrupting it: technology. If everyone took the time to slow down and be as intentional in their relationships as the staff of True Strides, the world would become more humane and open-minded, accepting people with the same unvarnished love of the clients and staff at True Strides.

WORKS CITED

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