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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
**Monday, April 27, 2015**

### **SUNNYSIDE EQUESTRIAN CENTER'S STAFF PARTICIPATE IN PATH CONFERENCE**



*Veteran Chris Hoff with therapeutic horse Arrow*

LINCROFT— The weekend of April 17-19, staff from the Monmouth County Park System's Sunnyside Equestrian Center in Lincroft took part in the *Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship (PATH) Region One Conference*. Director of Special Programs Jennifer Tevlin, MS, LAC, NCC, and Head Instructor Jackie West attended this conference held in Middletown, Connecticut, where they presented both a classroom lecture and an area demonstration.

During the conference, Tevlin and West shared their experiences using equine-assisted activities and therapies (EAAT) to work with veterans who have been diagnosed with Post

Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). They were honored to introduce veteran Chris Hoff who participates in EAAT at Sunnyside Equestrian Center. Mr. Hoff shared his experiences first-hand and explained how his connection with the horses helps shape his thoughts and feelings.

As part of its therapeutic riding program, Sunnyside Equestrian Center welcomes active duty or reserve military members, veterans, and their families, to participate in a full-range of EAAT. These programs are tailored to meet the unique personal goals of each individual, in a safe and supportive environment. As a PATH premier accredited facility, Sunnyside Equestrian Center is proud to partner with the Wounded Warrior Project (WWP) to provide custom EAAT sessions to all eligible warriors.

Sunnyside Equestrian Center also offers its own Horses for Heroes program, which provides EAAT scholarships to active duty or reserve military members, and veterans who have a disability, through the 501(c) (3) non-profit organization Special People United to Ride (SPUR). These EAAT sessions may be mounted or non-mounted, and can be conducted in either a group or private setting. Lesson goals and daily activities are based on each participant's individual needs and abilities, and can be modified throughout the course of the session.

A growing body of research supports that physical and psychological benefits can be realized as a result of participation in animal-assisted therapeutic interventions. Specifically, therapeutic riding programs and other forms of non-mounted EAAT help both active military personnel and veterans with a wide range of physical and emotional needs. These include improvement in their cardiovascular function, respiration, gross and fine motor skills, balance, muscular strength, and posture. For those with neurological disorders, riding can improve coordination and agility. Equine assisted activities and therapies also promote relaxation, enhance self-esteem, and provide participants with a sense of purpose within the community (Cumella, 2002, WWP 2014).

Horses are prey animals in nature. They seek out a confident leader, and rely on their herd to keep them safe. If a horse senses emotional distress, either in another horse or in a person, the horse will reflect those feelings in its body language and provide immediate feedback through its actions.

The Wounded Warrior Project describes how, through EAAT, participants learn to relax and have confidence in themselves around horses:

*If a horse senses calmness and confidence in a warrior, it will allow that warrior to lead it. Warriors learn to be “in the moment” and focus on what is right in front of them when working with horses. The horse also needs a leader who is mentally present. A horse may nudge a warrior that seems mentally withdrawn, or simply stop paying attention to the warrior until the warrior returns to the present. Warriors can open up about deeper thoughts and emotions without fear of judgment or rejection. Horses are nonjudgmental, welcoming and calming animals. They do not talk back and therefore warriors can share thoughts and emotions they feel uncomfortable sharing with other people. Horses often allow warriors to feel safe and secure (WWP, 2014).*

With combined credentials including mental health professional, therapeutic riding instructor, and equine specialist in mental health and learning, Tevlin and West are truly honored to be a part of the SPUR Horses for Heroes and Wounded Warrior programs and the opportunity to interact with inspiring veterans, as well as the privilege of sharing in their journey with some incredible therapy horses.

The Monmouth County Park System and SPUR have worked with the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship, and the Wounded Warrior Project, to expand its outreach and make its entire suite of EAAT programs available to as many individuals as possible.

For more information about the SPUR Horses for Heroes program and how to help extend these EAAT services to an active duty or reserve military member, or veteran who could benefit, please email [spur.email@co.monmouth.nj.us](mailto:spur.email@co.monmouth.nj.us) or call 732-224-1367, ext. 4. For more information about the Sunnyside Equestrian Center or the Monmouth County Park System, please visit [www.monmouthcountyparks.com](http://www.monmouthcountyparks.com) or call 732-842-4000. For persons with hearing impairment, the TTY/TDD number is 711. The Monmouth County Park System, created in

1960 by the Monmouth County Board of Chosen Freeholders, is Monmouth County's Open Space, Parks and Recreation agency.

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## References

Cumella, E. J., & Simpson, S. (2002, September 1). Efficacy of Equine Therapy: Mounting Evidence. Retrieved March 19, 2012, from

[http://www.eatingdisorderhope.com/article\\_efficacy-equine-therapy.html](http://www.eatingdisorderhope.com/article_efficacy-equine-therapy.html)

Wounded Warrior Project & PATH Equine Assisted Activities and Therapy Fact Sheet

Retrieved 14Apr2014

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