

Project Statement

Equine Assisted Therapies of South Florida currently Equine Assisted Therapies serves 118 special needs children and adults, the youngest being 6 years old and the oldest 71. Clients are assisted through therapeutic riding, hippotherapy or therapy in which a therapist uses the characteristic movements of a horse to provide carefully graded motor and sensory input. Equine-facilitated learning and Equine-facilitated Psychotherapies are incorporated into all aspects of the program. Equine Assisted Therapies owns eleven horses that are utilized in the programs.

My documentary focuses on the aspects of therapeutic riding which engages the rider both physically and mentally. Physically the rider is able to build core body strength as the movement of the horse mimics the human gate. Mentally the riders attention has to be engaged multi-dimensionally focusing both on the instructions they are given and on the connection with the horse. The shift in the riders' personalities is interesting to watch and in many cases they open up and enjoy the experience. The therapies shifts the conversation away from disabilities and being unable to participate in activities to being an individual who has impairment who can still be an active participant. Those with a physical impairment experience independent movement, those who are non-verbal and autistic individuals enhance their communication skills.

This work was produced as part of an academic service learning Documentary Photography Class that engaged in both real world documentary experience and benefited a local non-profit. My work as a documentary photographer develops over time, with the intention of engaging as much as possible with the community.

Acknowledgements

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Reflections

What were your initial expectations? Have these expectations changed?

I walked in having an idea of what to expect, I knew about equine assisted therapy and how it worked through my disabilities classes, I wasn't quite expecting to see the results and the changes in the clients and how well the horses are cared for.

How can you educate others or raise awareness about this group or social issue?

I think the best method I have to educate and raise awareness is to provide and show these photographs to the public and talk about the work. It creates a starting point for the conversation about disability and impairment. Equine Assisted Therapies of South Florida is using the images in their public space and as applying for grants.

During your community work experience, have you dealt with being an "outsider" at your site?

This is a difficult question to answer, I find myself somewhere in the middle of being an insider and an outsider. I am an "insider" to the process in the sense that I have a working knowledge of horses and a personal connection to disability. I am an "outsider" since I have not gone through an equine assisted therapy and I did not have a relationship to the organization prior to this documentary photography project.

How are your values expressed through your community work?

I want to avoid sensationalizing the subject's disabilities and leave opening the possibilities for bodies. I think that engaging in the community is incredibly important and allowing my self to be open minded and recognize my limitations when creating the images informed the work.

What sorts of things make you feel uncomfortable when you are working in the community?

I don't know ASL or communication skills with those who are non verbal, so documenting them felt odd since, even though I had blanket consent though the non-profit, I didn't have the subjects verbal consent. I did have consent of the parents or guardians and shared the images when possible.

What specific skills have you used at your community site?

Keeping in mind the framing and lighting of the subjects was important to this work. Working in both a digital and analog film format allowed me to engage with the photographic skill set well. Being open and honest with my subjects and engaging with them and the community around them allowed me to gain an understanding that I did not previously have. It was also important to me to not allow the camera to become a way dividing me from the individuals.

What are the most difficult or satisfying parts of your work?

I don't know how to answer this with the difficult part, the non profit was open to me being there, they were excellent with communication. I liked seeing the respectful treatment of the horses and clients, and the dedicated amount of volunteers that took part, many of them still in high school, was awesome. Seeing the confidence and personalities of the riders was satisfying.

