From the Director - Sonja Wingard

Nothing and Nobody is Impossible

I walked into ANT’s office from the barnyard a few weeks ago shaking my head. I still could not believe what we had just experienced. I said aloud mostly to myself, “We just saw an impossible kid …become possible.”

After many weeks of hood up, averted eyes, folded arms, avoiding the group activity, with anger seething from his few words ever spoken to an adult, we witnessed the start of a slow transformation. A bit of the armor had chipped away. Our matriarch horse Sucia and gentle-but-firm human mentoring touched his hurting heart, bringing it toward the light of healing and hope, again, making the impossible possible. The next week: hood off, eyes occasionally risking to look at us, asking questions and starting to participate in the process. This is powerful stuff!

Having celebrated ten years of Animals as Natural Therapy in the community and appreciating all the people who have helped us get to where we are really changing lives, I am again amazed at the new energy coming into our organization. Our Strategic Planning Retreat held every January was well attended with over twenty volunteers and board members. The teams for Marketing and Outreach, Events, Programming, and Grants have a new infusion of energy and ideas.

We have just received a grant for the third year in a row from the Charter Oak Foundation in California to help fund our therapist position. That foundation was started with the funds when an organization closed which had served at-risk teen women in California for years. Because our therapists are willing to work at a low hourly rate we have been able to offer therapist support for many of our programs over the last five years. Thanks to input from past intern Maggie McCrady the Washington State Quarter Horse Association has promised to grant ANT funds this fall to support our work.

We sincerely thank Leola Adams, our therapist of 5 years, and pray for her new path as she is moving on to focus her wonderful gentle energy on animal welfare. She sends her love to all and feels that without the amazing animal and human experiences here at ANT she would not have found this new calling in her life.

Leola, it is with great appreciation and love that we thank you for your many moments of supporting all of our wounded hearts.

Our loving and faithful God has been calling so many wonderful people our way. We welcome our new therapist Lorna Shepardson. Meet her on page 2. To aid in our horses’ well-being another new volunteer has come forward and that is Debra Thiesen, a gifted energy worker. She has donated many hours in the past weeks to helping our horses with various physical and emotional aches and pains. She is truly a gift that the Creator has sent to our herd of healers. In helping the horses they too are helping her heal from a traumatic horse experience in her youth. As with most of us in this work we benefit from our giving. The horses so appreciate her, when she arrives the ones who want work trot right over to her!

For non-profits to survive in these hard times we have needed to cut back on any unnecessary expenses. We have paid office staff only 15 hours a week and are relying heavily on volunteers. Special thanks to Susan Lewis, Katie Lewis, Ashley Frye, and Kira Derhgawen, Erica Percich, and Nancy Orlowski who have been giving many hours in the office, as well as Chris Betz our Western Washington University winter intern. Also thanks to Shawnti Rockwell, an Anthropology student, doing our follow up Visions grads phone surveys with advising by WWU professor Paul James.

The Blessing of the Animals was an incredible event as usual and you will enjoy Ashley’s article on page 3. Our intern Chris led the event with a lot of help from Bryn and other volunteers. ANT is starting a “Paying Tribute” web page to honor our animal partners past and present. You can post photos and share words reflecting how your pet has impacted your life while giving a donation to support ANT’s therapy animals as they impact many other lives. See page 8 of this newsletter for details.

Continued on page 2 below “My Journey to ANT”
My Journey to Animals as Natural Therapy

By Lorna Shepardson, M.A., Therapy-n-Motion

My journey to Animals as Natural Therapy actually began a little over two years ago. I had seen an article in the newspaper describing the amazing work with the assistance of a variety of animals in support of children, youth, and families. I decided to go to a Wednesday farm orientation and check out the program. I felt from the first instant that I had come home. How often does a person have that feeling? Not really very often. At the time my family was just getting ready to move but a seed was planted and I knew I would get back in touch with Sonja Wingard and the program.

Since moving to our new home, we have increased our animal family by 5, which now include 3 horses and a pony. I also found mentors in the world of Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy. I attended two of Leigh Shambo’s workshops and have attended 2 weeks of training in Arizona with Linda Kohanov. Between these trainings I was able to co-facilitate 3 groups for women struggling with many symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress. I was hooked and knew I was on the right path.

In the meantime I had begun my private practice, Therapy N Motion, using my herd as assistants in my counseling practice.

As a therapist I always felt there might be a more fulfilling way to support people in their journey to their hearts. Through the way of the horse am not only finding my heart’s desire but I am supporting clients in finding their true authentic selves.

Often when I shared with people the work that I was doing, the response I received was, “Are you working with Sonja at Animals as Natural Therapy?” I would explain that, “no I have my own private practice, but I hear she’s doing great things.”

About a month ago I stopped on a whim to check in with Cowboy Campsite, (they are developing a huge state- of- the-art training facility at the old Papetti farm site), to see what they were creating. I went in and introduced myself and met a man named Duke. I shared with him my training and he mentioned they had supported ANT in the past and asked if I worked with Sonja. I replied, “No, but I had heard of them …” I went home and called Sonja.

Sonja was actually in the office and I explained to her my training with Leigh and Linda. She was so excited she needed to stop and explain to the office staff and volunteers what was going on in this phone call. I met Sonja within the week and was told that funding was tight and she asked if I would help with grant writing. I knew the money would come. I jumped right in, helping to finish up a grant (“no I had never worked on a grant in my life☺”), and then helped by preparing the farm for the Blessing of the Animals.

So I have come back home to support ANT as a therapist in this amazing work. I am ready to begin the process of planting seeds in the hearts and minds of all that enter ANT’s sacred space at Windy Acres and see what wondrous healing can be cultivated through the support of the animals, volunteers and staff.

As my 7 year old daughter, Athena, worked beside me preparing for the ANT open house she said,” Mom, I just love being here. The people are so respectful and welcoming. I want to come back and help some more!” I am so grateful that finally now when someone asks, “Do you work with Sonja at Animals as Natural Therapy?” I can say, while jumping for joy, “YES, I DO!!!!!!!”

Where there is love, there is life”- Mahatma Gandhi
The weather was cold and ever changing, but the atmosphere at Windy Acres was nothing but warm, and with a feeling of calm excitement the festivities got under way. As groups started their tours of the farm where they would meet our many animals, more people would arrive to be greeted by one of our board members Amanda Howe. In this easy-going cheerful pattern things continued blissfully despite the cold and wetness of the weather. Children wore ear to ear grins while petting one of the llamas or rabbits while their parents showed much the same enthusiasm towards the horses and other animals they met. In this way the animals showed us once more the power they have to connect all different kinds of people, through the joy that people feel in their presence.

The first hour of the event was dedicated heart and soul to establishing that feeling of joy and love that has become so synonymous with ANT. While some enjoyed their tours, others watched a horse demonstration in the round pen. It was during that demonstration that the horses involved saw fit to show just how at ease they were in our presence. They proceeded to lay down right there in the middle of everything. Some would have seen it as a failed attempt, but to the audience all that registered was how trusting and at peace these animals were, even with so many watching eyes. In truth it may have been more of a triumph than anything else.

Shortly after that display of utter calmness by our horse companions it came time to assemble the animals in that very same pen so that the day’s main event could get started. People of all ages, some even as young as 4 years old, began to lead the animals into the arena where the blessing would take place. The horses formed a circle around the outer edges, while the other smaller animals joined together in the center. All were accompanied by people whose lives they had touched.

As the Blessing began, it was in a somber but rejoicing tone. People shared about the pets that they had lost recently and shared how each of those amazing creatures touched and changed their lives. A prayer was then offered by the Reverend Andrea McMillin bidding them safe passage and thanking them for their undying love and devotion.

When that portion of the ceremony was done, the rest of the Blessing got under way. The horses were individually blessed, while a short story about each of them was told by the people who had led them in. It was with a tone of celebration and profound appreciation that these animals were blessed and thanked for all that they do, and the lives that they impact. In the midst of all of this, the weather once again surprised us all by turning to snow, which rapidly got heavier. But in a matter of minutes it stopped as quickly as it had begun. On other days the temperamental weather might have drawn the celebration to a close. This day it did nothing to delay or halt us finishing what we had assembled to do.

After the horses were blessed, the llamas Esquel and Tobago were thanked for all that they offer and in the same way the rabbits and chickens, especially for their visits to elders and families in homeless shelters. There were also two dogs being blessed, one being the farm dog Scout, and Ben, who belongs to one of ANT’s amazing volunteers Dick Ward. Both are part of our visitation programs.

Attendees described the ceremony as “inspirational” and “moving”. It was plain to see that their feeling echoed across the farm and all of its guests. When the Blessing itself was over, the last hour or so of the day was filled with laughter and casual chit chat. Some gathered around the bonfire to keep warm, while others congregated in the tack barn enjoying the delicious refreshments. Still others had fun making pine cone bird feeders, while children gathered around the rabbit play pen, to meet and play with the bunnies.

Slowly our guests left in the same shuttles that had brought them to Windy Acres throughout the day. Despite the bitterly cold weather, they left with smiles on their faces and were in high spirits. So when the day was ended this event could be called nothing but a brilliant and wonderful success.
The Gift of ANT
By Dick Ward, Volunteer Mentor

I never know what’s going to happen each day I show up at ANT. How will the horses be today? Will the client I am working with be receptive? Often I’m not even sure how I’m feeling as I disengage from multiple activities to settle into some time at the farm. There is always a challenge and always a surprise. Here is a sampling of the rich experiences I’ve had.

I used to do home construction and have always enjoyed introducing the uninitiated to the joys of working with their hands. A while back I led a work party for college students from Western. Two of the girls had never used a hammer before. After I showed them which end to hold and the most effective way to swing it, they reluctantly started nailing on fence boards, each egging the other on. Four hours later, much to their amazement, they had added 30 feet of fencing. They stood back like a painter doing the final touches to a painting and marveled. They had nailed on upwards of 70 fence boards, keeping them evenly spaced and the same height. Wow, did they feel proud of themselves. They were so excited they wanted to start over again. Yes we can!

One thing we focus on at ANT is empowerment. The horses assist in this. Last Monday as K. was leading Sundance around the large arena, Sundance decided it was time to leave and started to follow another horse out of the arena. K. had not intended this but allowed herself to be pulled through the gate. I asked her how badly she wanted her recovery (we had talked about that previously). She smiled and assertively changed her horse’s direction, feeling the joy of being a leader and walking with a little more intent. Two days later she arrived at the farm with a big grin. “Guess what” she said, “I’ve decided not to drop out of Visions (her treatment program)” Did I help with that decision? I don’t know. Was I elated that she had decided to stay? You bet I was. It is such an honor to be a part of these girls’ recovery.

The path from addiction consists of small healthful decisions that in total add up to a mature purposeful adult. We have the possibility to help with a few of those decisions. How cool is that!

And then there is my own growth. I was once kicked by a horse at the farm. A team was having trouble cleaning a horse’s hoofs and they asked me if I could/would do it. Despite having just finished a farm tour and feeling disjointed and tired I said I would. Without grounding myself or taking time to assess the situation, I basically told the horse it was time to have her hooves cleaned despite her obvious discontent. Guess what, she had other plans….and rightly so! That’s a lesson I won’t forget. I’ve cleaned her hooves many times since and am proud of that. I am constantly reminded to not just throw myself at an animal, but to enter into a relationship with it….just what we’ve been teaching for years! Better late than never! Oh well! My dog sure appreciates it!

I hope this provides a feel for our experiences on the farm. I think I can speak for most volunteers to say that I’m usually always challenged and energized by what transpires. I look forward to being there. What a gift ANT is to us all!

The PAWS Curriculum

PAWS aims to answer the question; “What is your connection and responsibility to animals, the environment, and all living things?”

PAWS is an educational course at Sehome High School that teaches students the value of the environment and the connection that is possible between humans and animals. Students learn about animal related career pathways by participating in the internship opportunities at ANT as well as the Whatcom Humane Society. At ANT the youth do chores and take the animals to visit elders. Along the way, students improve their communication and social skills, develop empathy and a sense of responsibility, build self-confidence and improve grades and school behavior.
The reason why I first started volunteering for Animals as Natural Therapy (ANT) is because of all the DRAMA that was going on at a local stable. I was leasing my first horse and there were jealousy issues between me and the girl that I was leasing from. My mom saw what was happening and decided to “get me out of there.” So we went around the county looking at all of the different local stables trying to find volunteer opportunities. In the meantime the situation wasn’t getting any better where I was at.

When we came to ANT to see whether or not I could volunteer I was so nervous. I didn’t want to talk to anyone so I stood in the doorway and let my mom do all of the speaking. The thought of talking to Sonja scared me, I had no self esteem, it had been zapped from me because of bullying at school and at the barn.

I started volunteering with the llamas. It was a great experience, I would get Tobago out and work with him teaching him how to lie-down and walk next to me. Then I began working with the horses by playing with them for a while. After a year of general volunteering Sonja asked me if I wanted to help with the day camps. Sure why not? I like working with the animals… how hard could it be?

It was a lot harder than I thought. The horses acted so different around the campers than they did with me. I couldn’t understand what was happening. Sonja taught about “V” thinking, and balancing a give and take. That was interesting I was timid with my peers and they took advantage of that. So I decided right then and there that I needed to start standing up for myself in a way that I felt comfortable with.

I started talking to the girl that I was leasing from and tried to form a relationship. That must have ticked her off because things got worse between us. To get away from the drama, I started putting more and more energy into my volunteer work instead of self destructing. Whenever I was at ANT I could think clearly. It wasn’t “hustle and bustle”. Animals and people were treated with kindness and respect.

I loved showing horses but I just couldn’t handle the DRAMA. There was always something going on with someone. Horse showing was my life and still is but it just got to the point that some of the girls that I trained with and then showed against had such bad sportsmanship that it wasn’t worth it. Its not very much fun to show against someone who thinks that they are perfect and even when they place in the top three they get mad, and break down into a tantrum.

At ANT I could get away from it. At ANT I could do my best and not feel bad about being good at what I did. It helped to not be judged and to be welcomed as myself and it felt amazing. I was someone who could make a difference. The feeling was addicting, I started coming out to ANT two to three times a week. ANT taught me how to be strong in myself and how to make a difference in my life by helping others. By helping others I was able to help myself. I stood up for myself in a positive way, the bullies didn’t look so bad after all.

Now I’ve been at ANT for six years I work in the office and am on the Board of Directors as treasurer and teen rep. Sonja is one of my best friends. My self esteem couldn’t be better. ANT changed my life even though I was never in the program myself. The experience itself helped me out of a rut that I was stuck in.

Book Suggestion: Beauty from Brokenness

A new book on the healing that comes from the Spirit of God working through equine wisdom is Beauty from Brokenness: Bits and Pieces of My Journey into Wholeness by Constance D. Funk.

This is a powerful sharing of the healing experienced by a woman in our neighboring Skagit County. I was amazed to read of the parallels between our two paths in both our spiritual journeys and the common horse mentors we have both been blessed to be taught by. In the back of her book there is a great bibliography of both spiritual and horse-related resources for the journeyer.

“I want to ooze love from my pores like Maria and the horses. I want the love that is in my blood and under my skin to leave a residue.” (p.210)

But most powerful of all, as I read Connie’s book it finally hit me that people with their own horses or with the financial means to travel to amazing workshops get to experience these moments of profound healing. But what we do at ANT is offer this healing to those who will never have that privilege. I wept from the overwhelming-ness of this realization. --Sonja
Program Updates

Congratulations to ANT’s new riding instructors Amanda Howe, Bryn Palmgren, Terri Plake, and Amy Schilder.

The certification clinic was hosted by Patty Yust at her lovely horse facility with covered arena. These women became certified riding instructors with the Certified Horsemanship Association, which is the most recognized by our insurance company and is a strong format with emphasis on safety of teaching horseback riding. Since we are a NARHA affiliate center we do plan to get these instructors certified with them also as funds become available. Much thanks to the anonymous underwriter of this clinic and participant willingness to pay the registration fee, we were able to pull this off.

Since the focus of ANT’s programs is respectful relationship skills and trust building, we utilize Frank Bell’s Seven Safety Steps of Natural Horsemanship including massage and bonding. We often make use of Barbara Rector’s (Adventures in Awareness ™) philosophy of allowing the needs of the client to direct the lesson and un-mounted activities to reveal insight into one’s inner self. Also we use an EAGALA model for many un-mounted group activities.

Volunteer Training on February 21st revealed great enthusiasm from ten new and eleven continuing volunteers. Our new method of getting volunteers being checked off on two horses that they will know well was well received and volunteers felt that they learned a lot and it was very organized.

On-going Programs

New Horizons Program with Visions teen women in chemical dependency recovery building healthy life skills with horses and also visiting elders at St. Francis Extended Care Facility with the smaller animals twice a month. **

New Heights Program with Squalicum High School Bridges Program serving youth with a troubled and troubling past working with horses. **

Service Learning with Sehome High School PAWS class continues with Dick Ward and volunteers visiting elders with ANT’s animal partners to Mt. Baker Care Center and doing farm chores. They will be working on ANT’s Human Race team (see Whatcom Volunteer Center website) which Dick has agreed to lead.

Ferndale’s Vista Middle School special ed class will return again this spring thanks to a Build a Bear grant we received in conjunction with the school.

Youth Empowerment after school programs include private therapist-assisted sessions and group lessons.

** Indicates Programs really needing funding if you can contribute to this vital work.

Potential New Programs:
Anti-Bullying School Program
Corporate Team Trainings

Facilities and Critters:
Jean Hoene and Amanda Howe do a stellar job caring for our animals. Dick Ward continues to be in charge of repairs and work parties. Thanks to these and our thirty weekly volunteers both for your dedication to our animals and our clients! And thanks to Sanitary Services for the donation of our Sani-can!

Good news on Outcomes

Qualitative Outcomes: A thorough 8 page report was completed based on ANT program goals in Fall, 2008. Quantitative Outcomes: Pre and post testing with psychometric measurements was started with Visions youth in summer 2008. Follow up calls to past Visions grads have started in spring 2009. Reunion of past ANT Visions clients is offered to grads...tickets to the Bluegrass Bash.

Last fall, Japanese writer Atsuko Otsuka accompanied young women from our New Horizons Program to the nursing home. When asked what the young women have in common with the adults in this home, Emma told her:

“We go to the home because these people are locked up just like we are. They can't have their animals just like we can't. They can't move around and they can't talk much. They would try to smile, but they may not be able to. But they are just like us.

I met a lady whose name is Boots. She had a stroke and she can’t move around. One day she came to talk to me and said that I was pretty. She told me her story and I told her mine. At the end, she held my hands and we cried together. We don't judge each other. We are just the same. She said she didn't want to live after the stroke, but meeting me made her want to be alive. She wants to meet more girls like me.

I don't have a close relationship with my own grandparents, so I give my love to these people in the home.”

Our host Patty Yust and 4 new riding instructors
Who is helping, and how you can join in!

In 2008 ANT provided 11,226 hours of human-animal healing interactions to 415 people on an expense budget of $140,900.

Our wonderful human volunteers gave 6,450 hours of valuable time to care for our youth, elders and ANT’s animal partners. Their gracious donation of time has been valued at $116,000 by the Whatcom Volunteer Center.

Our animal’s contributions include 3,635 hours of their much appreciated time and love.

How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.
-Anne Frank

Volunteer Diana Meeks with Toby

Our Vision and Mission Statement
Animals as Natural Therapy strengthens our community by developing healthy, resilient individuals through animal-assisted education and personal growth.

We provide a safe, nurturing environment where persons practice skills essential for meaningful and successful relationships based on mutual respect, communication, responsibility and trust. The relationship skills developed with the farm animals carry over into the rest of their lives.

Our Wish List
- Good quality grass hay for our animals
- Repairs for our antique office sofa
- Fencing wood for repairs and additions
- A cover for our arena
- New electric coffee and tea pots for staff volunteers and visitors
- Chicken wire for our coop so we can get spring chicks

Thank you for believing in us!
We’re on the Web!

Visit us at:
www.animalsasnaturaltherapy.org
www.myspace.com/animalsasnaturaltherapy

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BINGO IN THE BARN
Hosted by Sudden Valley Women’s Club
Where? The Dance Barn in Sudden Valley
When? Friday, April 3, 2009 – 7:00PM- 9:00 PM
Who? All Welcome
Why? FUN!!! Support a good cause
All proceeds go to Animals as Natural Therapy
What?
Progressive CASH PRIZES
Raffle Prizes after each game
Beer, wine, soft drinks sold by Bob’s
Snacks sold by ANT
Bring your own snacks/refreshments
Host a table of friends!!
More information can be found at:
www.animalsasnaturaltherapy.org

THE HUMAN RACE

Start now collecting pledges for ANT and the Whatcom Volunteer Center.
Start gathering at 8:30 AM Saturday June 13th
Decorate ANT’s human and animal team
Race/walk starts at 10.
ANT usually wins Best Dressed Animal contest!
The event culminates with a complimentary lunch, prizes, and entertainment

Paying Tribute
We at ANT believe in honoring the amazing animals in our lives for the ways they help us and guide us. With that in mind we will soon be launching a special page on our website to do just that. If you would like to have your pet featured on the page as well, all you need to do is submit a photo and a small paragraph about your little critter that you would like to share with the world, along with a nominal donation of your choosing.