

Animals as Natural Therapy: Description of Organization

Purpose

Animals as Natural Therapy's (ANT) mission is to strengthen our community by developing healthy resilient individuals through animal-assisted education and personal growth in an emotionally safe environment.

Participants are guided to develop a belief in themselves and their own ability to change the course of their lives. This is accomplished through carefully-designed and challenging animal-assisted experiential learning activities that empower individuals.

History

Animals as Natural Therapy has worked with a variety of clientele. At this time we offer the Safety Net Project for youth and this includes intergenerational visits with elders for many of the groups. The Mobile ANT animal visits include the elder visits and also support WWU events around suicide prevention and community awareness-building events, sharing the impact animals have on mental wellness. We work with about eight US veterans each year. We offer occasional adult workshops on leadership and goal setting.

ANT's largest project, the Safety Net Project is an animal-assisted experiential learning program that was created in response to a request by Catholic Community Services in 1997 as an alternative intervention for "at-risk" youth. It focuses on developing essential life skills. In addition to one-on-one mentorship and group sessions, ANT partners with schools to provide leadership/ bully awareness, and self-confidence building weekly groups and workshops. Our unique and proven program utilizes animals as the therapeutic modality to help a person build awareness, develop respect for self and others, develop trust and ultimately find self-confidence.

ANT has offered innovative programs since 1999 operated at Windy Acres Farm. (a centrally located five acre farm owned by Sonja Wingard). What began as simple animal and youth encounters developed into a far-reaching, highly effective and sought-after experiential learning model. In response to the community need, we have developed the following programs/partnerships over the years:

1999-18	ANT started after-school programming, summer day camps and programming for inpatient CCS youth.
2002-18	ANT added a twice-weekly partnership that continues with Sea Mar Visions Treatment Facility for teen women struggling with chemical addictions. Inter-generational Mobile ANT started.
2005-18	ANT expanded Service Learning opportunities to middle and high school youth, in the Inter-generational Program
2008-15	ANT's partnership with the Bellingham School District BRIDGES program continues today, initiated by a high school special education teacher for 'troubled and troubling' youth.
2010-18	ANT started working with veterans with trauma 4 hours a week.
2014-18	ANT added 2 day Leadership/Bully Awareness workshops for middle school youth
2015-17	ANT offered 18 weeks a school year to a Squalicum High School Goal Setting class for youth with high anxiety and depression:.
2016-18	Northern Heights Elementary School bring youth with high anxiety and/or suffering loss.
2015-18	Lowell and Parkview Elementary students come weekly for the Safety Net project

Various years	ANT has worked with smaller school groups for shorter workshops, women in recovery from a CCS parenting program and CCS outpatient teens in recovery. ANT has offered adult workshops on leadership and/or goal identification.
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Needs Statement

90% of youth referred to ANT by organizations, schools and families as needing intervention are low-income and at-risk, with a variety of obstacles that will impede their ability to lead productive and fulfilling lives. These obstacles include criminal behavior (on their part or that of their parents), physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, drug and alcohol abuse, anxiety, depression, and Post Traumatic Stress. Without intervention, most will not graduate high school and many will face the consequences of continued substance abuse, potential incarceration and generational poverty.

In response to these statistics, all our interventions focus on helping young people identify their feelings and needs and overcome their individual challenges and obstacles, set clear and attainable goals, and continually review their progress toward meeting these goals. The insight and direction gained during these sessions helps youth achieve success in school and life and promotes a positive path to graduation.

Experience

ANT's collaboration with educators, school and community counselors, caseworkers and parents has caused ANT to serve three to four hundred youth annually ages 3-18. Summer day camps serve 60 youth yearly. The after-school program serves thirty to forty youth weekly in need of more intensive interventions due to past traumas. The intergenerational program pairs seventy youth a year with two to three hundred elders. All programs focus on creating mutually respectful relationships as well as learning leadership, communication, and teamwork. Additionally, we offer direct school programs for struggling students.

2017 School Partnerships

Bellingham School District BRIDGES program	7 elementary school youth, needing support managing behaviors. ANT helps youth learn to build self-awareness, manage their behaviors and possibly transition into regular classrooms.
Leadership/Bully Awareness school workshops	20 middle school youth, whom school counselors select, learn that true leaders communicate respectfully and effectively and that there is no room for bullying; leadership is practiced with horses and one another.
Service Learning	20 middle and high school youth learn how to respectfully handle ANT's smaller animals; and then, accompanied by these companion animals, visit elders in eight different residences.
Goal-Setting class	13 teens high school teens experiencing high levels of depression and anxiety that has significant impact on their school success come weekly. Students learn to find their voice and assert themselves with their horse and in a group. They also visit elders.
Farm visits/ field trips	95 youth. These sessions are for Preschool/Head Start youth (60) visiting the farm for mini camps. Also visits to community family shelters are made with ANT's animals. (15 youth) The focus of these visits is to establish respect for another, clear communication, and to build trust

Support groups	6 hand-selected elementary school youth come with their school counselor to practice behavior-management and confidence-building beside the horses.
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Our Program Staff

- Founder & director Sonja Wingard, BSN,RN, is a PATH Intl. Certified Equine Specialist in Mental Health and Learning, and holds additional horsemanship credentials. She has 44 years of nursing experience, most recently teaching nursing at Bellingham Technical College for 8 years
- Katie Rohwer is ANT's Program Coordinator and a PATH Intl. Certified Therapeutic Riding Instructor
- Haley Didier is a PATH Intl. Certified Therapeutic Riding Instructor with a B.S. in Animal Husbandry
- Joaquin (Jack) Aguirre is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist. He has provided counseling to at-risk children/adults and their families for 22 years in hospitals, foster care, and private practice settings. He also holds certificates in Biofeedback and Stress Management, and has trained as a Trauma Response Specialist
- Amanda Martin Hoppe is PATH Intl. Certified Riding Instructor and a PATH Intl. Certified Equine Specialist in Mental Health and Learning. Amanda holds a Master's in Education and teaches English at Whatcom Community College

Accomplishments

Our twenty-year history of collaboration with local agencies and schools shows the depth of our experience in the field of mentoring, and reflects the increasing demand for our services. ANT has been recognized for its value to our community by The Whatcom County Dispute Resolution Center honoring ANT with the Community Peace-builder Award in 2011; and the Whatcom Family & Community Network awarding our Director, Sonja Wingard, the Ken Gass Community Building Award.

ANT achieved and has maintained “Premier Accredited Center” status through the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship (PATH) since 2010. ANT is one of only 200 Premier Accredited Centers in the world, due to the rigorous accreditation process, and meets the highest industry standards for equine-assisted activities. Our equine instruction staff are PATH Intl. Certified Riding Instructors or Equine Specialists in Mental Health & Learning, or credentialed through the Certified Horsemanship Association and/or Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA), utilizing on-going trainings, testing, conferences, and valuable networking opportunities.

Outcome Measurement

We have relied on parent/guardian feedback, youth surveys, and school counselor reports to track progress and measure success. Below are the results of the 2016 phone surveys of parents/guardians conducted by a Western Washington University intern:

2016 parent/guardian phone surveys	% who saw improvement
Self Confidence	97
School	68

Friendships	59
Family	85
Respect	59
Leadership	71
Clear Communication	71
Gratitude	62
Self-control/Self-management	68

Keith Russell, a professor in the Recreational Therapy department at WWU, is assisting ANT in outcome measurement tools and we are piloting two new tools in 2018.

Our Network/ Similar Projects

There are multiple agencies serving low-income youth but with more traditional talk therapy; several agencies refer individuals for whom they are not seeing progress to ANT. ANT is similar to other experiential modalities that utilize “outdoor adventure” techniques. But those don’t include the powerful part that animals contribute nor the intergenerational components. And they are often financially out of reach for low-income families.

To create and maintain a “Safety Net” for youth, ANT developed strong partnerships with community organizations; usually in the form of referrals for youth in need of immediate intervention, for which there is an ever-growing demand. These partnerships are detailed in the chart below:

Whatcom & Skagit County Schools	School Counselors identify struggling youth and make referrals to ANT programs. Youth are often experiencing behavioral challenges and low academic performance.
Catholic Community Services, Compass Health, DSHS, SeaMar Community Mental Health Clinic, Brigid Collins	Refer youth for whom traditional treatment has proven ineffective.
Lummi Native American Youth	Utilize our program to assist with struggling teens. ANT also hosts a yearly mini-camp for 50 students from Lummi’s Head Start program.
Blue Skies for Children	Makes referrals for children struggling with low self-esteem that can benefit from the support that animals and a farm environment provide.
SeaMar Visions Chemical Dependency Treatment Facility	Partners with ANT on our New Horizons program which provides therapeutic learning sessions for 45 teens in recovery per year.
Opportunity Council/Kinship Program	Refers youth being raised by grandparents or other non-parental relatives.
Secret Harbor Foster Program	Relies on ANT to reach their most unreachable alienated youth.
Northwest Youth Services	Collaborates with ANT to provide summer employment opportunities for their youth.

Goals and Anticipated Impact

In his book, *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character* (2012), Paul Tough wrote that after he and colleagues researched American youth in various environments they identified seven character traits that successful adults had developed as children.



ANT addresses all seven of these character traits by facilitating self-instruction and self-evaluation through experiential learning sessions that inspire curiosity. Sessions begin with a physical and emotional check-in, this builds awareness of one's present state and leads to the identifying of one's immediate needs. Youth identify their individual challenges and obstacles, set clear and attainable goals, and review their progress towards meeting these goals. Lesson topics include: leadership, trust, boundaries, respect, clear communication, and goal setting. Then the action moves to the animals. At session's end, participants identify how they can use what they learned today to be successful at school and home, metaphors are created so one has a take-away from the insights gained.

Utilizing animals as a natural form of therapy is scientifically-backed. In the article, **Psychosocial and Psychophysiological Effects of Human-Animal Interactions: The Possible Role of Oxytocin**, researchers examined 69 original studies on Human-Animal Interaction and concluded the following positive effects:

- – improvement of attention, behavior, interpersonal interaction, and mood
- – reduction of stress-related parameters such as cortisol, heart rate, and blood pressure
- – reduction of self-reported fear and anxiety
- – improvement of mental and physical health

(National Institutes of Health/PMC website citing article/ research published in *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2012)

The Four Cornerstones of ANT's Programs:

1. A Safe Environment: The Full Value Contract is discussed and signed by all:

- Keep myself and others physically and emotionally safe
- Give and receive respectful feedback
- Work together as a team

2. We honor the intuitive nature of our horses and animals

- Because horses are prey animals, they are keenly sensitive, intuitive, and vigilant allowing them to be exquisitely attuned to our emotions, helping us learn to tune in ourselves.
- By responding and reacting to our feelings, horses become our “mirrors” and assist us in a deeper understanding of self and others.
- Horses require complete honesty from their partners. They live in the now and invite us to do the same.
- Each horse is unique with their own issues: ie. Slow to trust, boundary testing, history of abuse, addictions etc.
- Horses are powerful and they instill a natural level of respect.
- Horses promote asking for and accepting help in a non-traditional healing environment.
- Horses and humans are allowed to choose each other.

3. ALLOWING

We see the Spirit/ Creator at work in all elements of the program. Thus we must allow the animals /Creator and our higher power to guide the lessons and allow ah-hah moments and personal self-discoveries to happen. We do not control the situations or the outcomes, only assure the safety of all.

4. Take time to find Metaphors for life

A key component in these sessions is the process time. We facilitate a processing period and invite our participants to journal about their experiences. We discuss the:

- What?
What happened during the session?
- So What?
What did I think, feel, and do about it?
- Now What?
How will this affect my future choices?

About Safety

- An emotionally and physically safe environment is the only place one can safely challenge themselves to try out new behaviors and to solve problems differently.

- Many of the participants have never experienced this safety in their families or living situations.