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Building Community through Mindfulness and Equine Connection

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Introduction & Personal Background

When I work with horses, I see my reflection in their responses. Horses mirror our true selves, whether we like it or not. They are highly intuitive animals that use nonverbal communication to get their messages across to you. It takes time and awareness to develop a bond and trust with them. How one responds to a horse, and everything else in life, determines his or her outcomes. Horses can challenge, engage, reject, and ignore us based on our actions. It does not matter whether the day is Monday or Friday, the way you treat the horse is the way you will be treated. It is the golden rule.

All my life I have been around horses in my backyard. Much of my alone time was spent with these animals thinking deeply about things that really bothered me. However, if I came to the animal angry and disgruntled, nothing was accomplished, no matter how hard I tried. This mindset in turn made me focus my negative energy elsewhere and be fully in the moment.

I realized as I grew older and moved away from home to attend college just how lucky I was to have this amazing resource (i.e., horses) available to me. The time I had usually spent riding and working with our horses needed to be filled by new activities that would help me cope with stressors and become centered. When I did not have access to equine involvement in Montana, I realized I needed to find new ways for self-care.

Surely, I thought, I could find a cowboy there to take me riding. However, that was not the case; I met no cowboys. Instead, I found new coping activities including sketching, journaling, yoga, skiing, and hiking. These activities fell short of my expectations based on my all the positive experiences I had with horseback riding. Hindsight is 20/20, and now I see just how silly it was to have these expectations for the other activities. Different activities create different memories and connections, but it is what you make of the current moment that really counts in the end.

The encouragement my parents provided me throughout my childhood fueled my desire to find new resources and people to connect with in Montana. I became more aware of the lessons I learned from my parents, from the people I met through them, and the experiences they provided me. As successful business owners they always inspired me to be independent, so I could rely on my own ideas for employment, too. Recognizing the great opportunity for growth, my parents gave me an enormous gift of a college career for which I will forever be grateful.

The College Career

I started off my freshman year involved in many programs, even if they were not all that interesting to me, mainly because my mom said, “You should.” I kept thinking why do I need to

be involved in all of these things, can I not just take new classes and enjoy my freedom. As resistant as I wanted to be, I also knew that being active and involved in high school had gotten me to this point and I needed to continue this discipline.

I knew hard work would also be important to overall success in college and graduating on time. I was accepted into both the Global Leadership Initiative (GLI) program and the Davidson Honors College (DHC) at the University of Montana. These programs had high expectations and came with many rewards. However, I was close-minded to the freshman introductory courses. The courses, at the time, seemed like busy work and nonsense.

After my first semester, I knew my peers and professors better than the people living on the same floor in my dorm. This deeper connection from the introductory courses in the programs made my learning experience more enjoyable. The small classroom atmosphere fostered connections I would take with me throughout my college career. I wanted to understand the new material, I wanted to know more about my peers, what they did, how they got here, because they wanted to know about my stories, too.

The professors I had for my GLI and DHC courses truly cared about their students. They listened, constructively discussed topics, and opened up great opportunities for self-development and confidence building. Those professors showed me I was not just some small fish in the sea at the university; they showed me that my voice mattered just as much as others.

I went into college thinking I wanted to be a political science major. Then I considered programs like psychology or English. It was not until a conversation I had with an honors professor, with whom I grew close, that I was steered in the right direction. He told me, “Aly, have you ever considered communication studies?” Well, I had never even heard of it and I was sure glad I finally did. It took a deeper connection, one that could only be fostered with a more intimate learning experience, for someone to understand my ambitions and goals to make such a sincere suggestion.

My imagination and motivation was sparked anew in the classes I took for communication studies and for my minor in human and family development. Having a dedicated focus to interpersonal relations gave me a broad base of knowledge to help me move forward in aspirations. Taking the time to talk with people, getting to know them, and being sincere has really been the key to my success all along.

After four years at the university, I have been able to find my spot in a community that was once uncertain to me and one now which I can call my second home. I could not have done it without the conversations, connections, meals, classes, peers, professors that I met throughout my time in college and other extra-curricular clubs I joined. If there is one piece of advice I

could give to incoming freshman it is that one should immerse his or herself as much as possible into this wonderful place because it gives back tenfold.

Equine-Assisted Learning

While school was going well, finding an opportunity to be involved with horses again became a daunting task. I tried the equestrian team, which was not enjoyable because of the members' personalities and negativity. I contacted several ranches, but I seldom heard back, and when opportunities did come up they were more often a one-time deal. About this time I realized how important it was to just be nice, because you never know where the other person is at, and there is no better way to learn about people than by just starting a conversation.

With my new mindset, I started making connections that were positive and engaging. Specifically, I shared my passion with the new "horse people" I met because they wanted to hear about my experiences and I wanted to know theirs too. As dedicated horsemen and woman, these people have taken on the utmost patience and kindness in their work. By knowing these people, their horses, and stories, it has become obvious to me how much they inspire creativity and love.

A special opportunity arose for me to work in the equine-assisted learning field. Horse Empower, a program that works with at-risk youth, asked me to assist in summer camps and daily lessons. Somehow it worked out to combine my love of horses and working with people. I must attribute this opportunity to positive conversations and connections, especially those at the university in the DHC and GLI programs. I knew being a part of the equine program was going to be another great experience to add to my bucket.

The Horse Empower program has been in motion for the last several years in Durango, Colorado. The owner, Kim Hardesty, has been a family friend and an inspiration our community with her dedicated and loving hard work. While I knew she had this program, it was not until I was more involved with after-school care and a horse sanctuary in Montana that I realized how much I wanted to combine the two. I wanted to help kids get to a good mental spot through way of horseback and Kim embraced me into her work. She provided me with a great foundation to blend working with kids and working with horses together. I learned when to step back and let someone do the exploring themselves and when to step in to provide support. I take this experience and hands-on knowledge with me, use it with other activities, and see the universal application of simply being there for someone whether it is on the sidelines or side-by-side.

Equine-assisted learning programs develop the participants' mindfulness by working with horses in a safe place and with positive people. The actualization is self-found and on the participants' free will with available guidance from facilitators in different activities. Since

horses rely on nonverbal communication, this opportunity allows people to slow down, focus, discover, and reflect on why certain things happen. Ultimately, the theory behind this learning style is to trust the horse because the horse reflects our actions. The bond and relationship built is key to a positive outcome. I wanted to continue to build new positive experiences and put my skills to use.

When I involved myself in the equine-assisted learning program, I empathized the same feelings of frustration and joy others experienced with the animals. Those who had never been with a horse before either stayed within their comfort zone and were unsure of the unknown, or, on the other hand, blindly jumped right in out of curiosity. Those who had been around horses before with a positive experience were excited to take the lead or be involved. Those with negative horse experiences were skeptical and kept a distance. However, if someone was not trusting of the horse, the horse could not possibly be trusting of the person.

I have seen kids grow and prosper and become so much more confident in themselves within the first few minutes of being with a horse, which only continues to grow over the course of an entire activity or program. It is an experience unique in itself, unattainable without the love and care from our equine partners. My own learning experience in the program surprised me. Even with all of my background of horse knowledge, I was discovering new things about myself by what the horses were communicating to me. I knew this was an experience I wanted to provide for other people no matter where I was physically.

An example of a lasting experience comes from the first activity I was part of at Horse Empower. In the activity there could be no physical contact with the horse whatsoever, which intimidated others, but excited me. I was so confident in myself that I could move the horse to where I wanted it to be with purely gestures and body language. Thus, in the activity, my peers and I were supposed to get it to a specific destination across the arena. We rotated in a pattern allowing one person at a time to be the speaker where he or she was the only one allowed to talk for a minute and essentially “be the boss.” Each time we independently tried out our own methods to move the horse and the horse was not going anywhere. Each of us showed frustration and disappointment. I finally had to stop and ask myself, “Why can’t I get this animal to move?! I have the experience, the years, the knowledge, and I can’t get this horse to go anywhere.”

Then it occurred to me what was missing. I had been trying to do this all alone. My team was there behind me, but patiently waiting each of their turns to be able to speak which only consisted of raising your voice to the horse. We were not collaborating. We were not working as a team. When it came around to my turn I announced this realization to the group. I told them my time was short, but each of them could take on leading us when they had the speaker position and together we can get this horse to move! Ultimately, when all walked in sync and

verbally encouraged the horse to go forward, we were able to move him across the arena as a team effort.

This “Ah-Ha” moment is what equine-assisted learning is all about. It is central to the theory. When people come to realizations by themselves and live out their experiences first-hand, it is much more meaningful. It becomes a memory that shapes and grows the individual. As I reflect on my college career, I see many memories of engagement, growth, and worth. Just like equine-assisted learning, college is also about meeting someone where they are and then helping them get to be where they want to be. We are inherently social beings and need to feel connected, important, and motivated to keep trying. We each come from many different backgrounds; and when we meet each other where we are in our journeys and go from there, it leaves lasting positive impressions.

Being involved in this equine-assisted learning, especially with at-risk kids, made me think more about what resources are in communities for improving mental health and wellbeing. Watching this work touch lives in such a positive way really showed the importance of having resources and places where people can build resilience. I observed how these new connections were building up the community by giving people a safe place to learn where they could be inspired through equine connection. Putting an importance on mental health and well being benefits everyone. I wanted to know what other methods of outreach could be implemented in communities to build resilience.

Outreach

What started as a group discussion between my GLI capstone group regarding frustrations at school, what is the meaning of life, and activities we each do for self-care, turned into a project of building up community resilience on campus. The stress we were experiencing from school inspired our research and was confirmed by many cross-cultural studies. We felt there was a lack of resources on campus where one could identify self-care and practice mindfulness. Most did not even realize mindfulness was a path they could explore as a method of coping. Having the tools and knowledge to manage stress is vital in overcoming obstacles and stressors.

Jon Kabat-Zinn a professor at the University of Massachusetts created the program of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction that has shown to improve mental and physical health and what we chose as a basis for our project. He defines mindfulness as “Awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally. It’s about knowing what is on your mind.” My GLI capstone group all contributed to different methods of mindfulness since we all come from different backgrounds. Movement, journaling, acupuncture, meditations, art therapy, and animal connection are all components to the online platform.

Thus, our target population included students transitioning into college, finding a career path, and those traveling to and from new environments and countries, all groups from which there are individuals who are becoming strong leaders for our world today. Since transitions during adolescence and young adulthood have significant impacts on people's lives, our group recognized the relevance of stress as a community and global concern. We aimed at creating a mindfulness-based stress reduction curriculum that would be easy to implement and deliver in an online platform and an on campus student group.

Since we wanted to continue to build up our campus community of resilience, we thought our methods of implementation should be long-term solutions. The online platform we created for our curriculum and resources is through the University of Montana's Moodle page that can be accessible to all students within the campus community including distance learners and students studying abroad. Additionally, it can be easily accessed from any computer or even on your phone through the UM app. Currently, we have 30 people enrolled in the Moodle class page with connections to Residence Life, Curry Health Center, and Student Advocates to be involved in the fall to spread more mindfulness awareness and resources on campus. Moodle page link: <https://moodle.umt.edu/course/view.php?id=17592#section-11>

The student group we created is called Mindfulness Matters. We met every Thursday at 5 o'clock this semester so that students could develop their mindfulness practices and come together to have a voice on campus. We went through the ASUM lobbying process to provide funding for the group to continue in the fall. The online Moodle classroom will be monitored and updated by the student group as it expands its reach to include a larger portion of the student body and will be used as the base structure of the curriculum. The practices that are done within the weekly group meetings are documented and added to the Moodle platform as to allow for continued growth of the resource database. The students that have engaged with our Mindfulness Matters have expressed their appreciation of such a safe place with positive communication.

In our research we found that coping mechanisms associated with mindfulness have been proven to be effective across cultures that are both socioeconomically similar and different from ours. The curriculum we created draws from the most effective techniques we found for creating self-awareness and intentional action across cultures. Stress can be an inhibiting factor that is especially acute for high intensity lifestyles associated with higher education and globalizing pressures to succeed in demanding societies. Wellbeing should be a priority on every campus, students who are left untreated are more likely to drop out of college or become a danger to themselves or others.

We wanted to ensure that all students, especially those studying abroad and foreign exchange students traveling here, have access to such resources in times of stress. This type of stress reduction can be used across different cultures, and its self-focus allows each person to individualize their own practice wherever they find themselves. Managing this pressure is necessary for students to develop into capable and balanced leaders. We were focused on equipping students with mindfulness skills to become more aware and deliberate in their actions, thoughts, and words.

The equine connection and resources was one of my contributions. Since I had built up a community in that area of focus throughout my college career, I could now promote it through this platform and opportunity. Equine resources local to Missoula can be found on our online platform. Such resources include Montana Quest, The Learning Center at Red Willow, Horses and Heroes, Pearl Ranch, and Donrovin Ranch. These are all places of positive mind frames and active learning. Places I am really proud to know and be a part of in this community. I know personally they have helped me cope with stressors and I hope will help others, too. I hope to continue to work with several of these important resources because I know they can really make a difference for people. We all need more places where we can feel safe and continue to grow.

Closing Thoughts

At the end of my college career I find myself in a beautiful community of professors, peers, friends, and horses. I feel more comfortable in this space since I have drawn on these resources and connections. They are priceless and help assist one is where he or she needs to be. All of assets I can take with me into my next step of life. Professors in the GLI and honors program took time to talk and get to know me, a gift I am sure to pay forward. Taking time for others, even if it is just a few minutes, can lead to truly amazing connections and experiences.

It took until my senior year to realize that all along I had been practicing mindfulness in my own way through riding horses. However, the sensation of centeredness I get from riding I realized could be found anywhere. It is a mental state of mind, adapted to where I am. While I enjoy riding and value the animal connection gained from it, I became more aware this semester that I could find that same feeling in other activities. It has helped me cope even more with all of the stressors in my college career and now something I can carry with me.

All of these experiences cultivate into being able to graduate on time with a major I thoroughly enjoy, a minor that gave me practical experience, honors cords for my GPA and student group involvements, and an award for outstanding senior in my department. Always say yes to connections; one never knows where they can lead. Even when times were uncomfortable, uncertain, and challenging, reach out to people and allow those experiences to teach lasting lessons.

“The most precious gift we can offer others is our presence. When mindfulness embraces those we love, they will bloom like flowers.” Thich Nhat Hanh

“It is not what happens to you, but how you react to it that matters.” Greek Philosopher Epictetus