

# Now I See a Person Institute: Equine Assisted Psychotherapy

## Community Engagement: A Collaborative Community of Voices in a Recovery Model<sup>3</sup>



*Laura V. Myers, Angela Priest, Tomomi Mikawa, Lilit Zilifyan, and Susan Swim<sup>4</sup>*

Now I See a Person Institute is a nonprofit clinical and training institute using Community Engagement: A Collaborative Recovery Model. Horses partner with therapist to provide collaborative change. It is through talking and new experiences that new possibilities arise. Conversations evolve in a spontaneous manner of reflections. As opposed to an office setting, the ranch provides an atmosphere of normalcy. Here conversations ensue between therapist, client, and horses surrounding themes of building healthy relationships, managing conflict resolution, and promoting healthy self-identities. Other benefits include developing strength based and future orientated goals for transcending such events as coping with grief, placements, losses, and transitioning back into society.

Now I See a Person Institute (NISAPI) reflects the works of Tom Andersen, Harry Goolishian, Harlene Anderson, as well as a host of others. We use what we call at the Institute *Community Engagement: A Collaborative Recovery Model*. In our recovery model of community-based work, we work within the entire client system. It is a reflective venue where the clients are the experts in their treatment and aides in directing the course of therapeutic change. The therapist's position is to reflect the clients' dialogue back to them in a different enough manner that new possibilities arise. In this manner, the dialogue evolves in a way that is not too unusual for the clients to hear. During the reflection, the therapist alters the discussion through slight changes and through these slight changes, the clients are able to steer a new course.

In our experience, any participation with clients must derive from authentic collaboration. In all of our work, we embrace the idea that severe mental illness and addictions are often symptoms that make a person be seen as deficit. Often, all that is seen are symptoms and not the person, the context, nor the relationships in - or potential relationships within - the community. We think that most of the "people" we work with have the possibility of recovering their own agency, deciding for themselves the best "solutions of their own situation", and have the opportunity to empower themselves to design their possibilities to live in a better way. Therapist, psychiatrist, social workers, client, and community support are all team players on the client's team. Our clients see themselves as the directors of their services, for if services are not self-tailored to the needs of the individual in community, then these plans are

<sup>3</sup> We thank Dr. S. Swim for sending this (2008) research article with voices of clients and therapy team.

<sup>4</sup> Laura V. Myers, M.S. MFT Intern; Angela Priest, MFT Trainee; Tomomi Mikawa, MFT Trainee; Lilit Zilifyan, MFT Trainee; and Susan Swim, PhD, MFT, [swiminc@aol.com](mailto:swiminc@aol.com)

for services that only serve ourselves! Clients wish and need to be in charge of their treatment and lives; we wish to create an environment where no one feels judged but, rather, is allowed a conversational space where the client leads “the team” to what is important to talk about. Clients need the freedom to express their thoughts in a manner that respects and hears their ideas for change. We talk in the clients’ language. We work with severe and chronic mental health illnesses in this manner on the premise that no one wishes to be talked to, but talked with. These ideas are evidenced based and reflect the works of the Houston Galveston Institute, Kanankil Institute, Now I See a Person Institute, and the Institutes of Miller, Duncan & Hubble (1997), Jaakko Seikkula in Finland, the Rhizome Way of Christopher Kinman and Lynn Hoffman.

At Now I See a Person Institute we use horses as co-therapists in Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP). Interacting with horses and clients are congruent. Each need nurturance, love, and guidance to successfully participate in society. With both learning is maximized in being with a relational connection with a significant other. Young horses learn to bond with their significant other. An environment of healthy trust and attachment occurs without complex human requirements of judgments, expectations, or prejudice.

With regard to children, adolescents, or adults this trust and attachment establishes a healthy sense of identity and empowers innate strengths and an identity of self. Horses aid in helping one to understand and grasp such tenets as loyalty, love, nurturance, respect for others, understanding one’s own emotions and behaviors, as well as overcoming the anxiety that stems from traditional modalities of therapy. With the horse as the therapeutic partner, safety and freedom arise around therapeutic dialogues.

Horses can feel manipulation and fear and view these emotions as dangerous, for they queue into our emotions. If a person suggests fear, for instance, then they wish to acknowledge this for there may be something fearful out there for them. In contrast, when horses feel love and nurturance they resonate with nonverbal communication. Hence, Horses can teach one to love, nurture, and care for another. They have been said to mirror the emotions of humans. I think they surpass mirroring and, instead, instruct. We become engaged in conversations with each other... how we feel and think, and how that is resonated in relationships. Can one talk of love, pain, loss, or joy if we are afraid?

Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) is recognized internationally as an effective mental health treatment option for a multitude of mental health problems and diverse populations, including at risk youth and adolescents, adults, couples, families, the elderly and life coaching. EAP focuses on the animal/human relationship and the significance of the horse as a therapeutic partner in the relational endeavor. EAP provides love and acceptance and fills voids within behavior and emotions. In contrast to complex human relationships, horses provide relational connections that are relaxed and intimate. The need for horses to be cared for in their activities of daily living finds parity in the human need to be nurtured and loved.

EAP provides an alternative understanding of life that an individual has never been aware of. Horses provide options and choices. This is acquired by watching, being formed and informed, by the horse’s mannerisms in their environment. The impact on mental and emotional health can be seen in

people who love and nurture animals as a friend or akin to a family member, and not a pet. Tenderness and love evolve through a connection of providing unconditional love and loyalty.

If we alter the context, or way of doing conversation, a door opens for new feelings, thoughts, relationships, and change. This is inevitable. Conversations make us feel and do differently. Problems can range from symptoms of depression, anxiety, grief, family and couple conflict, phase of life issues, as well as organizational issues. Below are excerpts from interns, trainees, supervisor, and clients on how this occurs.

***Laura's Voice:***

Now I See A Person Institute is a place where, as a social community of therapists, interns, trainees, foster parents, social workers, biological parents, and children are able to be in a natural environment and begin to open up a dialogue that has not yet been spoken. This is a place where horses are the assistants to the people who gather amongst them. They are the bridges that stretch across generations, genders, religion and ideas that have lay dormant and unspoken. This occurs with our model of recovery-focused care. The clients learn and live words of compassion, honesty, respect, choices, heart, and normalcy. These are words used with horses and in observing horses. Horses give and demand these words. In such, we create a relationship with new language and meaning.

In this environment, individuals come to therapy with their own unique, personal experiences and belief systems that influence their lives within their networks of family, friends, church, and community. It is the richness of the experiences that each voice expresses that is essential for generative dialogue to grow. It is in this sacred place that rules of a system are voiced, discovered, debated and reworked. This is the meaningful work that can be done and that can dissolve a problem a family has encircled. The word "therapy" is not used with the clients that visit the institute; the client becomes part of a community of respected humans where dialogue is the goal. In thoughtful, contemplative response, interns and trainees demonstrate to the client that they are "being" with them by developing an atmosphere of trust where new thoughts and inner ideas can be exchanged. The listening and responding between therapist and client is like the spinning of new strings of thoughts. Those strings of thoughts are woven into a new narrative, a cloth that fits perfectly to the client's way of "being." The inner dialogue of the client is given space to seek perspective. The language is influenced by experience, phase of life, social context and many other influences. Language becomes its own ecosystem nurtured by the aforementioned influences. In postmodern therapy, each time a client uses their words to express their unique narrative; they are creating the possibility for change through the dialogue between therapist, client, and the individuals that are invited into the conversation (social workers, biological parents, foster care parents, horses, friends and others). This is a social community organized through language and where knowledge is received and can be reworked and tested.

There is no pre-planned intervention in this natural and rugged setting and everyone involved is part of a community of listeners and speakers. Questions are not preplanned. Dialogue is the ultimate goal for the therapist. Dialogue becomes the key to the questions that will be formulated. The client is allowed

space to guide the dialogue with their answers. The words that a therapist chooses to use are powerful for the client because he/she can hear that they are being listened to. The skill that must be shown from the therapist is to learn how to listen and truly hear what is important to the client. More skill follows by generating dialogue through the questions asked that are relevant to the client's narrative. Through generative dialogue, inner thoughts are being exchanged and integrated into others' thoughts. It is through this dialogue that the client begins to understand themselves and others within the community who are important to the client. The therapist is not the expert, but a conduit to creating a safe space for a community of individuals to express their inner thoughts and be heard. It is through this dialogue that individuals begin to understand one another and themselves. As therapists, we strive to recognize that conversations create new meanings and in the subtlest ways. It is the client's words that help them become the expert in their own lives through the use of new words and ideas generated through dialogue. In this process, each client strings their thoughts into words and through the strung words change occurs; a self-tailored poem.

Now I See A Person Institute is a natural environment where many voices are encouraged to speak and be heard. Interns and trainees are guided on how to listen, to be guided by the words of the clients, to ask questions relevant to the client's narrative so they know they are being heard, and to promote generative dialogue.

#### ***Angela's Voice:***

Now I See A Person Institute is an environment of understanding; where clients, as well as trainees and interns, are allowed to be who they are without judgment. I notice that people change in this environment of their own accord. Each person is empowered to live and work in the manner that is most suitable for their individual personality, as well as their relationships with others. Conversations flow freely without the expectation of a destination, an ebb and flow of ideas that build upon one another until a resolution is found. People are allowed to influence one another through a conversational exchange in which the client is the guide. In this environment it is okay to "not know" the answer, for both the therapist and the client. In this environment, the client does not become reliant on the therapist to produce change through expertise; rather, the therapist provides the supportive atmosphere in which the client can become self-reliant (Anderson, H., & Swim, S., 1995).

#### ***Client's (mother) Voice:***

As a parent, the times I've come and talked to you, it's a place to be peaceful, where you can begin to understand why things occur. My son had the impression that we would just be going to speak with someone sitting behind a desk with a pencil and paper and that's not how it is here. I'm sometimes surprised at the things that come out of my own mouth in our conversations. Those things make me feel better as a parent and make me understand all of the experiences we've gone through. I bring all of it together here and it's changed me as a parent. All of that just made everything better. I notice a change in myself and I know that it's going to help me with both of my children. I feel so relaxed when I come here and I notice my children do too.

***Client's (mother #2) Voice:***

It relaxes me to know that you're helping my boys. With you guys working with my son, it gave me the opportunity to think about my relationship with him and make changes, which is something I'd never done before. As an example, I would catch myself raising my voice and yelling at my son before and, now I practice thinking about it before yelling at him. So now, I don't really yell at him anymore and he's been more open about telling me what's going on with him. I think that the people that I'm talking to are very professional and easy to talk to because they know how to listen, which gives me an opportunity to talk things through and discuss and come up with various ideas. That's not something I have anywhere else in my life, which is nice. I like having the opportunity to talk with a therapist and not be criticized, so it's easy to come up with ideas, discuss solutions, and to release tension. Sometimes an unstructured environment is more productive because there's no specific agenda; I can come here and discuss something different every time or I can pick up right where I left off. It's also interesting to work with different therapists because I'm finding that the therapists are not "cookie cutter". They all have their own personalities and different backgrounds, different levels of experience and skills. It's nice to come into that environment without expectations. This works well for me because I can walk in here and just start, I don't have to come with answers. I can come with questions and discussion topics and I leave feeling satisfied. In an office setting, where there are physical boundaries because of the walls, there's the immediate concept of confidentiality and privacy and it makes you very aware that it's a secret and that what you're going through is a bad thing. The office environment closes you up and it constantly puts in your mind "what are they going to think about what I'm saying." Human beings are social animals and this is a social environment and that's very calming. We're constantly walled in all the time, at home, in the store, at school, and that's not how we came about; we were hunter-gatherers, outdoors where there are animals, trees, and getting dirty is okay. For my sons, there are no electronics here (Gameboys, Wii, etc.) and they're left to use their imagination and find fun. I think they're also reacting to not having to tow-the line, meet expectations, and obey the rules; even though there are rules, they don't feel like rules.

***Lilit's Voice:***

I believe that the moment individuals step in to the ranch the change occurs. It is such a different environment that people do not put effort into talking or sharing: they do it willingly without pressure. This environment is even greater for kids, who usually have a hard time sitting still and talking to a therapist. In this environment, they have the opportunity to be involved with animals while therapeutically conversing with the therapist. People feel safe in this kind of atmosphere; it is not the typical clinical office. I believe that the stigma is not present with this kind of approach since there is no actual clinic. I enjoy going to the ranch and seeing how clients progress session by session. Clients' success is my success.

***Client's (son) Voice:***

I have never expected to be in a good relationship with my sibling. I was thinking that day would never arrive. I am happy with the change I was able to make with the help of my counselors. My relationship really grew with my brother. We respect each other and care for one another. I was lucky enough to have my psychotherapy sessions and discuss all the things that were bothering me. I had a chance to collaborate on the existing issues and find the right solutions. It was very important to me to be heard and understood. Kids usually do not have voice and their stories are not being heard, however I felt like in this environment I was taken seriously. With the help of my counselors my parents finally were able to understand me and take my stories seriously. From that day on my relationship with my parents changed as well, since they saw the other side of me.

### ***Client's (Mother #3) Voice:***

After four weeks I have noticed how important it was for me to relate to my son differently. He can ask me to be calm and I can be. My husband has also changed. We work hard at being calm because the children behave differently. Getting angry in the past did not help at all. I just went over the good list with my son, as we have been busy since we left The Farm on Monday. He has been saying some really nice things and I think it is all due to the "I'm Proud of you and I love you" that you shared with. I still go back to my old behavior but it's not as bad and I can see the light at the end of the tunnel. I feel myself getting mad and I breathe and think before I react. I try not to use my old techniques of threats and tell him "do it now" because I said so. I can see the positive attitude I have changing his attitude and it's so great!

### ***Tomomi's Voice:***

When I first visited the ranch where the Institute is located, my heart simply rejoiced. It was like a little heaven on earth as there are all sorts of animals. It is a very unique environment where people and animals live together with respect. I witness on a daily basis that the faces of clients, especially of kids, brighten up as they enter the ranch and pet horses and small animals. Joining is so easy with the therapeutic power of these animals and change occurs immediately in this setting.

There is no air-conditioning, chairs are covered with dust, and your clothes inevitably get dirty. However, most clients enjoy this natural setting and come back regularly with hope and excitement, rather than dropping out. It is not uncommon to hear them say, "I cannot believe my shy and clingy daughter spoke to a stranger for the first time after our first session. She even cried wanting to go back to the ranch", "My son joined us for a meal for the first time in many years", or "I don't know what happened, but my sons behaved so well after our last session".

It has only been three months since I started working as a trainee; however, I am already deeply touched and fascinated by the strengths and resiliency that our clients show. What could be more rewarding for a therapist than seeing a smile on her client's face upon leaving the session? It is simply a privilege to be a part of their journeys toward change and growth.

### ***Client's Voice:***

My daughter and I have been going to therapists for years. Every time I walked away I was told I was a bad father and that my daughter had behavior problems because of the divorce or me. Never once would they listen to me despite how hard I tried. Here I feel safe. Here I am not afraid,

### ***Susan's Voice:***

At Now I See a Person Institute we see all mental health challenges and diagnostic labels. Our clients are diverse in ethnicity, socioeconomic status, culture, ages and genders as our team is. Often we are honored to have all involved in the problem system to engage in therapeutic conversations. Our intent is to provide:

- **Collaborative Practice:** All services are self-tailored to the client in community. We try to bring in all who are part of the client's system. This could include schools, mandated operations (CPS, Probation), potential employers, social workers, caseworkers, psychiatrists, specific friends or relatives, or anyone that can support the system. It is important to know their needs and have their collaboration. Therefore, therapist, psychiatrist, social workers, client, and community support are all team players, empowering the client to gain self-agency engages self responsibility in the client-led direction. This enables meaningful change to occur.
- **Connection, Collaboration, and Change:** We wish to create an environment where no one feels judged but, rather, is allowed a conversational space where the client leads "the team" to what is important to talk about. Clients need the freedom to express their thoughts in a manner that respects and hears their ideas for change. We talk in the client's language. We work with Severe and Chronic Mental Health Illness or any emotional challenges in this manner on the premise that no one wishes to be talked to, but talked with.
- **Connect:** Through establishing a connection of full presence with the clients and the community, where communication, relationships, and problem solving skills can be improved.
- **Relational Collaboration:** Refers to the completely shared and egalitarian experience of defining the focus and direction of therapy and community services.
- **Being Fully Present to Listen:** Full presence refers to a therapist's posture of genuinely honoring and valuing the client's and community's narratives by speaking honestly and caringly, as well as co-creating genuine trust and humility, enabling the strengths of the client to abound.
- **Community in Conversation:** We invite the community and the clients to construct a dialogue beginning from the relationships that we are creating. We take the necessary time to know, walk and talk with the people and know how we can be useful. We agree to listen and show absolute respect for what they express about themselves and of the community.

- We think that most of the people we work with have the possibility to recover their own agency (capacity for hope and change), to decide for themselves the solutions of their own situation, and to have the opportunity to empower themselves to design their possibilities to live in a better way in this moment even though any symptom may have re-occurred.
- This is why we decide to work hand by hand with the individuals and with the community to construct a new relation to their psychiatric problem. We aim to make recovery achievable with those persons who cannot currently control the way they consume alcohol or drug substances. These communities have been marginalized because of their situation, whatever it is, and we are clear that together we can construct a history of hope and wellness, making the changes we need to, based on the idea of human diversity as multiple possibilities.

An example of how we do this will be in a story of a family who experienced reunification last month. We were referred a family from a local foster care agency. The mother had a history of criminal behavior and being incarcerated from age sixteen to her mid twenties. Five years ago this mother over disciplined one of her then six children. The children were removed from the home and after being seen by six different therapists they were unable to have therapy or supervised visitation. We first started “seeing” the family that had not been together in five years. In participating with this family we included all in the family’s system. This included the biological parents, foster parents, the children of the foster parents, the social worker at the foster care agency and the social workers at the department of children’s services.

When we first started the family could not be “seen”. The mother was afraid and angry. The father who had been able to visit the children during the five years at intervals was overwhelmed and afraid. All of the children except for the youngest did not wish therapy or reunification. The older children had been told many stories about their parents, especially their mother and thought the mother was a child abuser. With the children being removed the mother had another child who was an infant when therapy started. All the children were drawn to the infant. In the first session the eldest attempted to hit the mother. A year of conversations took place at a ranch with a fire pit where hot dogs were roasted; horses were ridden and hugged, and walking.

In some agencies each client will have their own individual therapists and a family therapist. At NISAPI we are a relational endeavor of conversations that lead to amazing changes. Foster parent and biological parents are collaborators. Social workers are able to “see” the biological parents and biological children in a different light. Therapists, social workers, foster parents, foster parents’ children, biological parents, and biological children are all in conversation together. When conversations occur in this seamless manner new possibilities and new meaning abound.

All the children have been returned home. Some changes that I observed were the parents became parents again and the children became part of their lost family. At sessions they interact as any loving family. They have transcended the past for constructions of new identities and family meaning.

### **Concluding thoughts:**



We have added a second site to NISAPI. It is located on a 4,000-acre national park. Here we have no horses but an abundance of wildlife with a lake. Conversations take place at picnic tables, on playgrounds, walking around the lake or taking hikes. We use dogs as co therapist. As with the horses they are not used in every session but conversations evolve in the same safe and spontaneous manner. What appears to work at both sites is how we relationally connect and have conversations that lead to new meaning and possibilities in the first session. These sessions may be an hour or four hours long. We take the time needed for the conversations to be inspired with hope and new meaning. To explain how this is done is difficult. I think explaining collaborative therapy is as well. In simple terms we just talk. As Lynn Hoffman has said it is like kitchen table talk (personal conversation with Lynn). We are humble and curious. We do not assume what the person wishes to have happen. We see a person and not a label or a diagnosis.

These types of conversations co-create change. It is inevitable. Currently we are conducting research at both sites and have found 80% change with our client surveys.

### **Implication for practice and future thoughts:**

One does not need a horse ranch or a park to do this type of collaborative recovery focused care. We also do in home therapy. I really enjoy this. Our team enters into the family constellation. We are invited to stay for dinner, outings, and special events. We maintain our ideas of connection, collaboration, and change in any setting. This also could be incorporated into an office setting, since I did this type of therapy for many years before going outside. In my office I would take the children across the street for their favorite snack. Some sessions would need more time and I would allow for this. I do think it is important for our clients to feel welcomed and that we care.

### **References**

Anderson, H., & Swim, S. (1995). Supervision as collaborative conversation: Connecting the voices of supervisor and supervisee. *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, 14(2), 1-13.