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# CTREE, Fighting Chance and Stony Brook Southampton Hospital Partner To Create Important Support Network for Cancer Patients and Survivors



8 Photos



 **Cailin Riley** on May 27, 2024



When Lisa Standiford was a child, she would wake up at dawn many mornings, and trek, bleary-eyed, over to the neighboring farm of a family friend to help milk the cows. She was not paid for that job — instead, in exchange for getting up at what she called “an ungodly hour,” she was allowed to ride one of the horses.

Standiford, now an East Hampton resident, remembers taking the horse for long rides, bareback, through the fields, alone, with no helmet — in hindsight, not the safest thing to let a kid do, she says now — feeling utterly free.



Her mind wandered back to that moment in her life many years ago, and she smiled and laughed, recounting the story while standing in a large grass field dotted with bright yellow buttercups at Topping Riding Club in Sagaponack on a sunny and warm enough Monday morning earlier this month.

Standing next to her was Southampton resident Carla Scagnelli, holding the lead rope of a strikingly brownish gold colored horse named Noodles. Standiford had one hand on his hindquarters for balance while she gently brushed his side with the other hand, stroking away dirt, dust and a considerable amount of the thick winter coat he was now shedding.

Standiford and Scagnelli were joined in the field by two other horses — a dark brown gelding named Archie, and a white gelding named Lucky — and several other women who were chatting, laughing, joking and enjoying the spring day at the picturesque farm just a stone’s throw from the ocean.

They share a lot in common — a love of horses, for starters, but, most notably, the understanding of what it is to receive and then live with the devastating news of a cancer diagnosis.

Since the fall of 2022, many of the women, and several others, have gathered together to take part in a program that is providing them much-needed support, relief and guidance, thanks to the collaboration of three important community organizations.

Last year, the Center for Therapeutic Riding on the East End, known as CTREE, joined forces with Fighting Chance, the Sag Harbor-based cancer counseling and support nonprofit organization, to offer weekly sessions where cancer patients and survivors can spend time out in nature with CTREE’s horses, grooming them out in the field and working on horsemanship.

Before doing that, they sit in a small circle of folding chairs, with a box of Dunkin’ Donuts and coffee on a folding table, and chat together — about the horses, about their cancer treatment, about mundane aspects of life and also about bigger emotional battles or quandaries. In short, they are connecting with each other, supporting each other, taking a moment to breathe and simply be.

This year, the program was enhanced by bringing Stony Brook Southampton Hospital into the fold, specifically with Tracie Sullivan. She is a personal trainer and fitness instructor who specializes in creating exercise routines for people with or recovering from cancer and strokes, and also carries specialties in functional aging and movement disorders. She created a cancer exercise program along with the Physical Therapy Department and wellness department at Stony Brook Southampton Hospital several years ago.

When she works with the women at Topping Riding Club, she incorporates horse language into the routines to make it fun. She also pointed out that the movements naturally associated with grooming the horses are perfect for lymphatic drainage, a key element of the cancer exercise routine.



On that sunny day in early May, the women spoke about what being part of the group has meant to them.

Standiford was encouraged to attend by Amy Zachary, who works with Fighting Chance and has been a psychotherapist for more than 35 years. Zachary is energetic and enthusiastic, and spoke about why working with the horses is so powerful for the women who come to the farm every week.

“With any illness, there’s isolation, which is never therapeutic or healing,” she said. “To bring people together and form a like-minded community is extremely therapeutic and powerful.

“Animals are great teachers,” she continued. “I used to bring my basset hound to work, and it would always bring a smile to someone’s face. Not everyone is a horse person, but you don’t have to be.”

There are benefits to the gatherings beyond what the horses provide, she said. The meetings are an opportunity for information and resource sharing among the women, and the beauty of the farm and the idyllic setting, she said, can’t

be overstated.

That has all been true for Standiford. Zachary and Fighting Chance were a lifeline for her a few years ago when she was going through surgery and treatment for breast cancer. She finished her treatments last spring and, as of now, doctors are not seeing any evidence of disease, but with an element of her tumor that can cause spread, Standiford said it's still a mental and emotional battle at times.

Being with the horses and the group helps.

“It’s just a chance to be out in this incredible nature and be with the horses,” she said. “The stillness and the majesty of the horses is just something to focus on. It’s something bigger than yourself, mentally and physically. It just takes you out of your head.”

One element of living with cancer is the way it consumes everything, and the vast number of decisions that need to be made on a regular basis, which is overwhelming, Standiford said.



“It’s not just, you break your arm and here’s what you’re going to do to fix it. There’s a lot of decisions that you have to make regarding your treatments, and you have to weigh those options, so this really helps still your brain.”

Being in the field brushing Noodles brings Standiford back to the time when she rode through the field at the neighboring farm, with nothing else on her mind, and nothing between her and the horse, not even a saddle.

It’s that kind of feeling that makes Virginia Daddario willing to brave the long and often traffic-clogged drive from Riverhead to the farm each week. She was diagnosed with an aggressive form of breast cancer in 2021, which required removal of six lymph nodes and a month of radiation.

Coming to the farm, grooming the horses, and participating in Sullivan’s workouts, designed specifically for women like her, are part of her efforts to keep her recovery moving forward and to stay healthy.

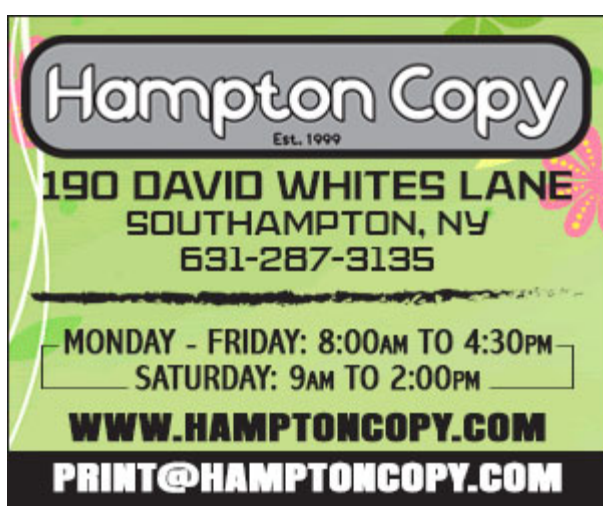
It has provided a boost emotionally as well, she said, while gently brushing Lucky, a bright white horse, who happily nibbled on grass and occasionally tugged his volunteer toward the fence and a new and greener patch. The opportunity the gathering provides to simply connect and talk to other women has been huge for Daddario. “Because I was so down in the dumps,” she said.

Daddario has a son who has been physically and intellectually disabled since birth, and she described how he was not expected to ever walk or talk, but he recently competed in the Special Olympics in a race and won a medal.

“So you never give up hope on anything,” she said. “I said, if he can do all that, I can get through this.”

Daddario still works as an RN with disabled patients, and also cares for her son, but she cherishes the time she gets to spend with the other women, and the horses, once a week. Like most of the women, she had a love for horses when she was a child, and remembered being taken to the racetrack in Scotland with her grandfather.

“I just love horses — they calm you down,” she said. “Just touching them and looking in their eyes. They have the most beautiful eyes.”



The group meets for several weeks in the fall and spring, but typically takes off during the too cold months in the winter, and in the full heat of the summer. Over the winter, they were determined to continue meeting, so they’d gather weekly at Fighting Chance and watch horse movies together.

That camaraderie, even when they can’t be around the horses, is so key for the women, and Scagnelli said she sees that every time she’s with the group as a volunteer.

“It’s so nice to see a community of people come together like this,” she said. “It’s a terrible cause to have to rally around, but the sharing they all do is great. They’re a little vulnerable at times, but it’s so nice to see people give real emotion.”

Scagnelli has also been struck by how all of the women, even while in a literal fight for their life with cancer, are still consumed with worry about how their diagnosis is impacting people around them; spouses, children, friends, which makes the support they give each other at the meetings even more important.

That’s been the case for Joann Goldberg, a melanoma survivor whose only child, a daughter, was also diagnosed with melanoma recently. Without any other family members to lean on, Goldberg said the group has been a lifeline.

“I had no one to turn to,” she said. “You don’t want to go to your close friends and say, help me, be there for me. And it brings people down. You’re always crying and carrying on. But I found a home here. I found people who went through what I went through, and it was wonderful. There’s total acceptance.”

Goldberg used to save her allowance money to take occasional riding lessons when she was a kid, but the opportunities for that were few and far between for a kid living in the Bronx.

“When I got involved with these people, I was in heaven,” she said. “I was with people who were going through the same thing I was going through, plus I got to play with horses.”

Decades of experience in the therapeutic riding and equine therapy world have taught Karen Bocksel that horses can be powerful for helping a wide range of people with varying needs, from military veterans suffering from PTSD to children with autism and other physical and intellectual disabilities. And while therapeutic riding is huge, people can benefit greatly from the healing powers of horses without ever swinging their leg over their back.



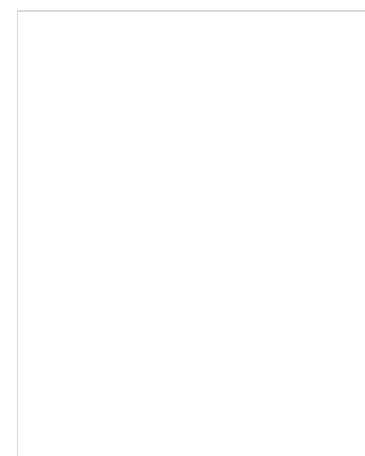
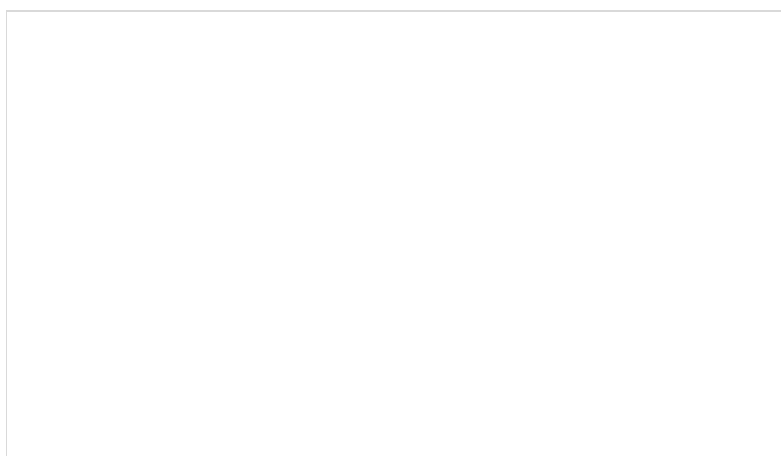
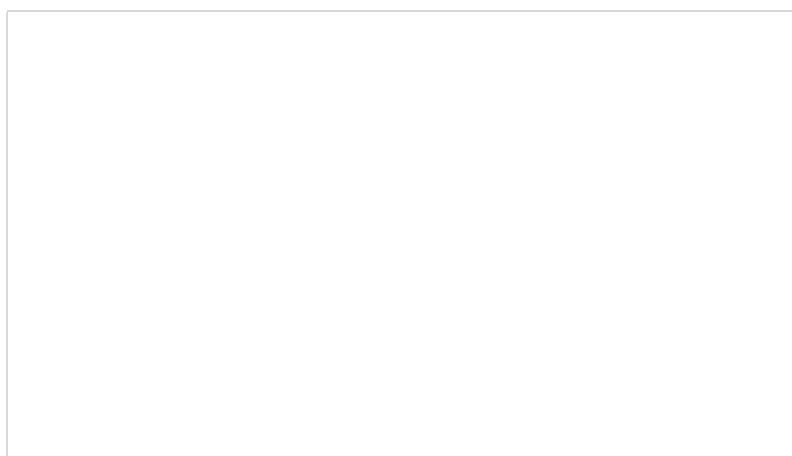
“Our horses mostly have been ridden in lessons, and that’s one way to utilize them for clients,” Bocksel said. “But learning horsemanship and working with horses on the ground is a huge component that people often overlook.”

Bocksel explained more about what makes the simple act of grooming and interacting with the horses in the field so powerful for the women in the group.

“You can’t make [horses] work with humans, but they mostly want to, and that’s a very powerful thing for people,” she said. “In particular, for clients going through this horrible disease they’re not controlling anything. There are doctors visits, schedules to keep, medicines to take, surgeries to get through. They’re not in charge, they just have to do it because they want to live. When they come with the horses, they are in charge. They’re able to ask the horse to do something.

“The horse doesn’t give a hoot if they have cancer.”

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