

THE

# Latham Letter

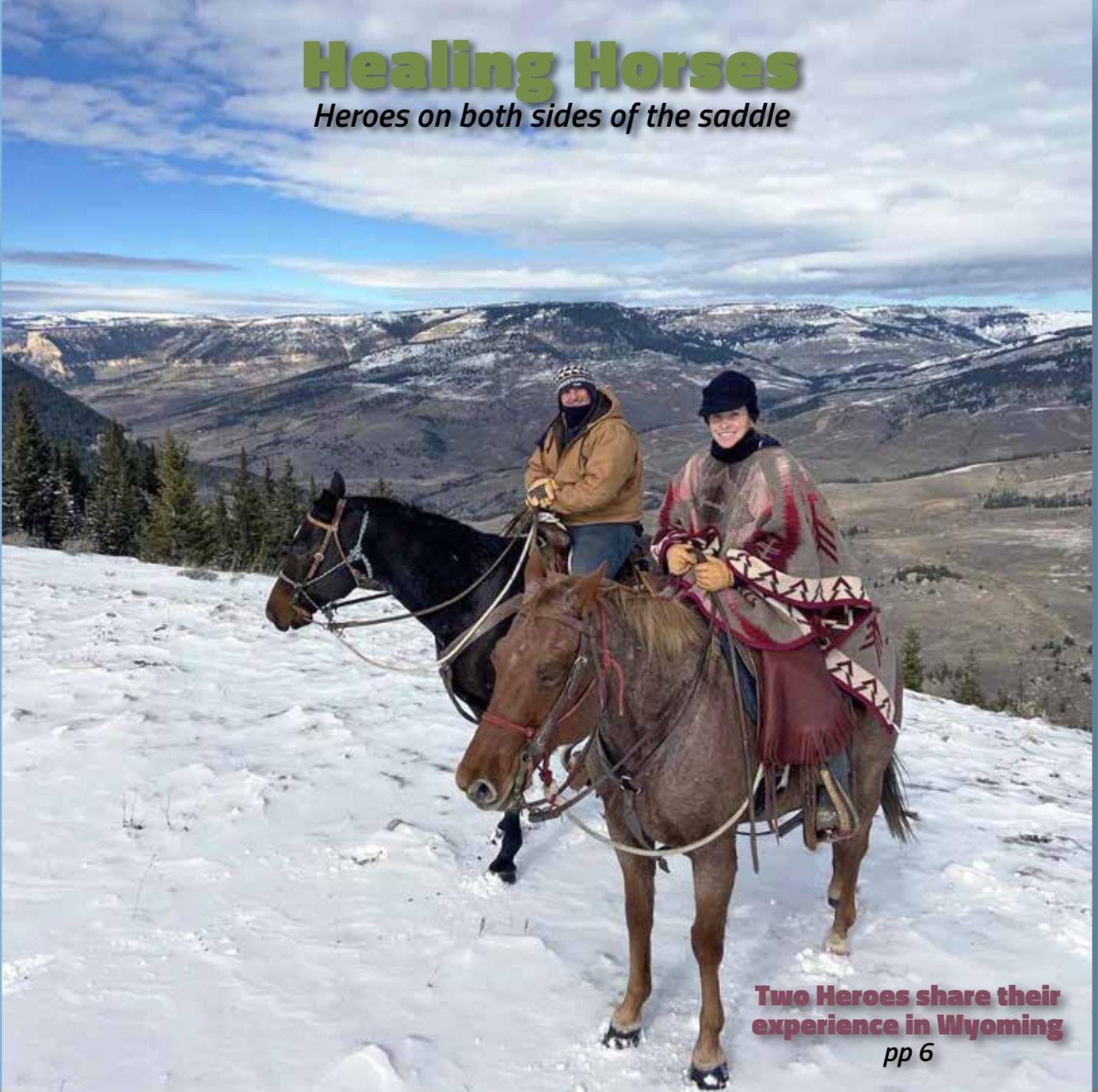
VOLUME XLI, NUMBER 5

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PROMOTING RESPECT FOR ALL LIFE THROUGH EDUCATION

## Healing Horses

*Heroes on both sides of the saddle*



**Two Heroes share their  
experience in Wyoming**

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**EXTRA EXTRA - NEWS**

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**HUMAN-ANIMAL INTERACTIONS**

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# Hautism

## *Is Equine Therapy for Autistic Adults*

*By Rebecca Evanko,  
Wilderwood Equine  
Therapy and Rescue*

Wilderwood was delighted and extremely appreciative to receive a grant from the Latham Foundation. The grant covered tuition and learning materials for one participant to complete Wilderwood's nine-month program in 2021.

Wilderwood's program was brand new in 2021, following a successful Pilot Program in 2020, and one of the greatest challenges was funding it: as a new program, we did not have any firm data to support its success. The provision of scholarship funding in this first year was critical to help recruit participants for an untested program who could then provide the data we needed for analysis.

To determine the Latham Foundation grant recipient, we designed a scholarship application that considered background information, statement of financial need, an assessment relating to desire for change, and a short essay. Our grant recipient was Amelia, a 17-year old autistic young woman.



*Photography by Cheyenne Chavez*

### *Our Participant*

At the start of the program, Amelia was about to graduate from high school. She interviewed with her parents, who were very keen to see her complete her studies with Wilderwood. At the time, she stated a desire to be a pastry chef, but did not have the test

scores required for the local college's Culinary Arts program. She also experienced challenges, typical for autistic people, with executive functioning, self-regulation, and sensory issues. She had no prior experience with horses.

Wilderwood's curriculum goals include positively impacting

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the cognitive, physical, emotional, and social well-being of autistic people, building transferable, real-world skills for successfully navigating the non-autistic world, and learning activities designed to address executive functioning, self-management, self-discovery, and communication. Coursework emphasizes equine-assisted transpersonal experiences, animal communication, self-awareness, stress management, and practical job and career skills.

Our first semester involved working with a focus on autistic strengths, planning goals, and communicating with the horses. As we explain in our philosophy of *Hautism*, horses are a lot like autistic people – and the program emphasizes working and connecting



with them on multiple levels. *Hautism* also incorporates nonverbal language that can be learned by people and then exchanged between horse and human for mutual benefit and understanding. As it develops, the communication fosters an exchange of reciprocal trust, kindness, and love. This, in turn, contributes to a sense of well-being and groundedness for both horse and human that

carries over into everyday life. During her first semester, Amelia connected very strongly with Desmond (Des), perhaps the cheekiest and most playful of all the Wilderwood horses. She would seek Des out and stand with him in the roundyard or paddock, and Des would playfully nudge her and let himself be scratched behind the ears.

In the second and third semesters, we enacted the plan developed with Amelia in the first semester, which involved steps to reach her stated goal of being accepted into culinary school. Because Wilderwood actively works with community members as an integral part of its program, we assembled a team of mentors to work one-on-one with Amelia. She received tutoring in Math and English from one mentor, instructional baking sessions with two experienced community bakers, and culinary tutoring from two recent graduates of the same program to which she wanted to apply. Throughout this time, we integrated the horses, especially Des, with Amelia's attendance at Wilderwood.

Just prior to the start of the second semester, Amelia's parents met with us and expressed how happy they were about the progress their

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## Grant Metrics

Participants Served:  
1, Family Members: 5,  
Community Mentors: 5,  
Instructors: 2, Teaching  
Assistants: 1, Horses: 5,  
**Total:19**

## 2021 Program Conclusion

Amelia not only graduated from Wilderwood, she raised her Math score by two levels and her Reading/English score by one level. This was sufficient for her to be accepted into the Culinary

daughter was making. Amelia's father, in particular, emphasized how pleased he was with the program and that he was looking forward to seeing her complete it. As Amelia had just graduated high school, the family took a vacation to celebrate, with the plan for her to begin semester two at Wilderwood on their return. Tragically, however, Amelia's father lost his life in an accident during that vacation. The loss delayed Amelia's return to Wilderwood and we were not sure if she would even be back at all. Amelia, however, did return to fulfil her father's wish that she complete the program, and she graduated at Wilderwood's Open Day on October 30 with her peers.

For our graduation metrics, we aimed for 75 percent of participants to demonstrate measurable improvement and achievement in pre/post testing, passing grade in coursework activities, and achievement of at least two goals set at the start of semester relating to job or career advancement, education, or personal satisfaction and esteem. We are proud to announce that 100 percent of our participants met or exceeded these goals. Amelia was one of them.

Arts program. But, there's a twist to this story. Often, when we do something completely different or out of our comfort zone, we challenge ourselves to succeed and discover things we never imagined possible. This is true for many of our graduates, as it was for Amelia. Just after being accepted into the culinary program, Amelia changed her mind about her major. Her placement scores were good enough for her to apply to – and be accepted into – an





Associate of Arts in Early Childhood Education program. As of writing this report, Amelia has started her studies, is doing well, and is excited about her future. She has more confidence in her abilities and the motivation to succeed.

Scholarship funding from the Latham Foundation made it possible for this young woman to successfully complete a program that opened doors she had not even thought possible – and though it was not intended, provide a community of strength and support for her during a time of tragedy and loss. Here is a thank you letter Amelia wrote to the Board of the Latham Foundation during her first semester at Wilderwood.

### Program Media Coverage

Wilderwood received multiple media coverage and

several awards for its documentary film, *Hautism and Wilderwood*, during the period covering the grant:

“Hautism: A Curriculum Connecting Horses and People with ASD.” *Strides!* Magazine of Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship (PATH) International, Summer 2020.

“Equine Therapy for Autistic Adults.” *Valencia County News Bulletin* July 2020.

“Our Community Cares.” *New Mexico Department of Health Newsletter*. April 2021.

“New Local Panel Podcast Gives Voice to Autism.” *Valencia County News Bulletin*, April 2021.

Mindfield Film Festival: Best Documentary Finalist, 2021

Autfest Film Festival: Official Selection, 2021

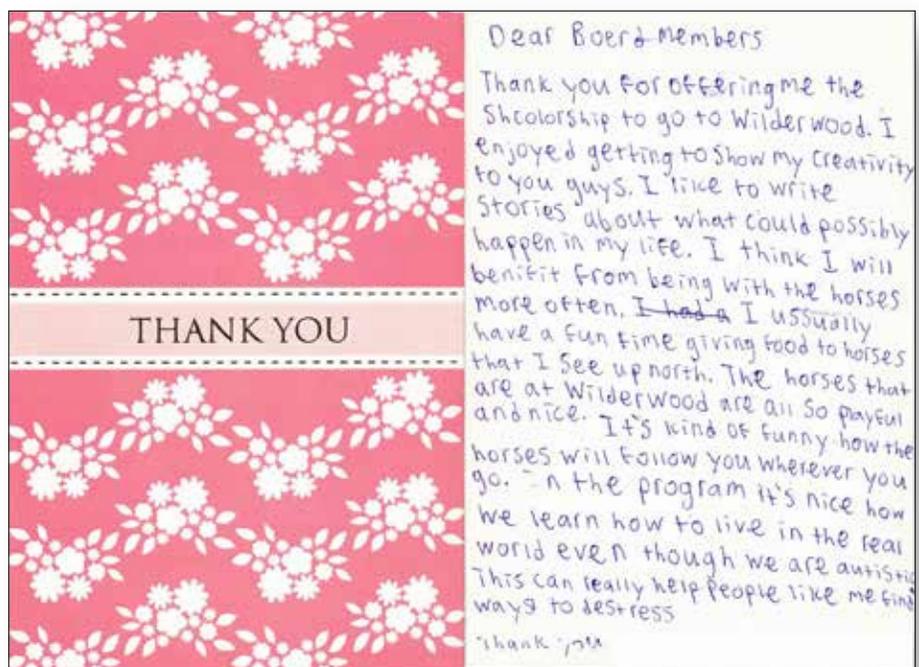
Best Shorts Film Festival: Winner, Best Short Documentary, 2021

Beyond the Curve International Film Festival: Finalist, Best Documentary, 2021

EQUUS Film Festival: Winner, Adult Therapy Documentary, 2021

### What We Learned

Creating a new and innovative program from scratch challenged



us and many times took us out of our comfort zone. Moreover, discovering things we had not imagined possible was not something reserved for our participants. With input from all involved with Wilderwood, we decided that going forward the program would be offered in a compressed, immersive format rather than spread out over three semesters. This means that we can serve more participants with more “entry” points to the program throughout the year, as well as participants from across the United States.

Wilderwood has also developed a program for autistic children and youth, modified from the adult program. Offered over

eight-week sessions, the program will open to its first cohort of nine children in March 2022. Wilderwood will also be offering Wilderdoodles – a summer camp for autistic youth in June 2022.

The exponential growth and success of Wilderwood continues to amaze and delight us. At the heart of it, and what inspires us, is the support and encouragement we receive from others: our autistic participants, their families, the community volunteers and mentors, and the foundations and granting organizations – like the Latham Foundation – who took a chance on us with a new venture. Thank you for believing in us, and believing in what, together,

### *Biographical Paragraph*

Dr. Rebecca Evanko is the autistic co-founder and Executive Director of Wilderwood Equine Therapy and Rescue. A horsewoman with a penchant for endurance riding, Dr. Evanko is a former university faculty member, Academic Dean, business owner, and writer. She holds an M.A. in Rhetoric and Composition, and a Ph.D in Cognitive Linguistics. Dr. Evanko is a Board Certified Cognitive Specialist and is currently studying for a second M.A. in Clinical Mental Health Counseling.

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