

Equest Founders' Story



As Equest celebrates its 40th anniversary this year, the spotlight shines on its co-founder, Susan Schwartz. It is her vision, dedication, and lifetime commitment, alongside co-founder Evelyn Zembrod, that connects “*Humans. Horses. Hope.*” to improve lives daily for children, adults, and veterans with diverse needs.

The story begins in 1981 when Susan, an equestrian herself, volunteered to help Evelyn at an equestrian club with an annual day of horseback riding for children with cerebral palsy. This day changed her life forever.

The children arrived in wheelchairs and on crutches. Instead of happy, excited faces, Susan saw very little emotion, little communication with each other or the teachers and volunteers, and a little fearfulness.

“We got them on the horses, but their leg muscles were so tight, we could barely get their feet in the stirrups,” she remembers.

A short time into the ride, smiles and sparkles started showing up in the faces of the riders. With a gleam in their eyes, the children started laughing and having fun.

The joy of the ride was just one of many benefits for the children. “The movement and warmth of the horses’ bodies had a relaxing effect on their rigid muscles, and soon the volunteers could lower the stirrups to accommodate the children’s feet,” Susan said.

Susan and Evelyn observed that the riders were using core muscles and balance to stay astride. They were able to balance because their legs had dropped, their core muscles had kicked in, and they were using muscles they hadn’t used in years due to being in a wheelchair.

“We were flabbergasted,” Susan said. “If one day a year makes this much difference in a child’s life, what would happen if they rode once a week?”

This remarkable experience that captured their hearts launched the first therapeutic equestrian center in Texas, initially called Freedom Ride Foundation. Over the next four decades, Equest evolved into a world-class therapeutic equestrian center, the first in Texas. It received premier accreditation by industry association and began entering prominent riding competitions, including World Championships and Paralympics, on behalf of Team US. It expanded its therapeutic programs, including its most recent Hooves for Heroes program which provides veterans and their dependents equine facilitated mental health counseling at no cost. Equest now has more than 200 clients, 30 therapy horses, eight instructors, four PT/OT therapists, two mental health counselors and over 400 volunteers who are the lifeblood of the organization.

Evelyn passed away in 2000 but founding Equest gave her and Susan years of joy. “We’ve had people come through here who were told by doctors that they would never be able to be independent, and eventually, with therapy, we saw them walk again,” Susan said. “It’s rewarding to see people doing things they’ve been told they would never be able to do.”

Susan remains extremely active in Equest and is serving as an Honorary Co-Chair at *Equest’s 40th Anniversary Gala: Celebrating 40 Years of Horse Power*. The stellar Southern soiree will be held on Saturday, June 5, 2021, 6:00 to 11:00 p.m., at its newest facility, the Al Hill, Jr. Arena, at Equest at Texas Horse Park. Details and tickets available at www.equest.org/gala.