

Complimentary

# Ojai Valley

## Visitors Guide

Fall 2011

SERVING VENTURA, LOS ANGELES AND SANTA BARBARA COUNTIES



Monica Ros, founder of Monica Ros School, reads to children circa 1950.

## Monica Ros School Celebrates 70 Years

The tradition of excellence in arts  
and academics continues....

see story page 12

SPECIAL ADVENTURE SECTION • DINING GUIDE • ART GALLERIES • FALL EVENTS CALENDAR  
HOLIDAY HOME LOOK IN • HAUNTED OJAI • BEST HIKING TRAILS • AND MORE!



# Equine Horse Therapy Creates H.O.P.E.



One of the stars of the Reins of H.O.P.E. organization Chrome, a 14-year old quarter horse, gets ready to begin his daily routine in the corral.

**Story by Michelaina Johnson**

**Photos by Logan Hall**

It's unsettling, but true — one in every five military personnel who have been deployed in the past six years has post traumatic stress disorder. Even more shocking is the number of cases diagnosed in the last year; Healmyptsd.com puts the number at 50 percent.

Recognizing the extreme need for treatment back in 2007, Ojai's Julia Sardonía, a licensed marriage and family therapist, expanded her nonprofit Reins of H.O.P.E. (Human Opportunity Partnering with Equines) organization to include a new branch: H.O.P.E. for Warriors. The program provides therapy through interactions with horses — all at no cost to active duty military members, veterans and their families — to help soldiers heal and integrate back into society.

Sardonía, along with Marie Ortiz, M.A., an equine specialist, and Lynn Dorgan, a licensed marriage family therapist, operate the H.O.P.E. for Warriors program. The goal of the program is to provide “healing, hope and health to those who have sacrificed so much for u.”

Equine-assisted therapy involves using horses as a therapeutic tool. “A horse's size and power are naturally intimidating to many people,” Sardonía said. “Accomplishing a task involving the horse, in spite of those fears, creates confidence and provides for wonderful metaphors when dealing with other intimidating and challenging situations in life.”

H.O.P.E. for Warriors presently has five clients, and has no accidents with the horses on its record. The program uses “ground activities with the horses (that) are designed to mimic real life issues. This



Reins of H.O.P.E. co-founder Julie Sardonia, left, explains the routine to the author while co-founder Lynn Dorgan listens in.

allows the warriors and therapists to ‘see’ where the problems are and find solutions that work.”

“With the guilt and anger, (service members) cannot accept things they have done and learn to integrate the things into their psyche ‘metaphorically.’ If you have to get a 1,000-pound animal to jump over an obstacle, you can tackle anything at home. It is a powerful image,” said Sardonia. “Horses have an unique way of mirroring the service member, so they get people to focus on the here and now.”

I was invited to participate in a therapy session and experienced equine therapy firsthand. The one-acre clearing hidden among a grove of orange trees was an exquisite escape from the business of life. After signing the necessary papers, I was charged with choosing one of three horses to work with, Sis, Star or Chrome.

Each horse has a unique story. Chrome used to live on a ranch and broke his leg in an accident, so he cannot be ridden. Star is an older, 24-year-old horse with arthritis. Sis used to be a show horse and “brings a wonderful, feminine energy to the sessions,” Sardonia said. I was drawn to Sis, thinking she was the one. But to my surprise, Chrome came over to me and chose me as his partner.

Once human and horse are paired up, Sardonia has participants create an obstacle course out of some of the items. Unsure about what to do in my session, I grabbed four hula hoops and four orange cones and set them diagonal and evenly spaced from each other. I also put a small jump at the end. The H.O.P.E. crew asked me what the obstacle represented in my life. I didn’t know, I said, but suspected I’d soon figure out.

I was instructed to guide Chrome through the obstacle course — without using a halter. Chrome did not move, in spite of my cooing, and finally pushing. But all through his resistance, he continued to show me love by rubbing me with his neck.

I decided to try with a harness, but still, Chrome would not move. I changed our direction, so we would start at the end of the obstacle and not the beginning. Just when I was about to give up, we began moving — until we reached the jump. Back to square one, I thought.

About that time, I finally realized Chrome did not know or care about what I was trying to accomplish. He only wanted to be with me.

I tried to move us again by making a sharp turn, and it worked. We maneuvered around the jump and halfway through the cones when Chrome stopped. I tried again and again to move us forward, thinking that we were so close to the finish. We stopped the session before we finished, since time was almost up.

The H.O.P.E. crew asked me what metaphors I saw in the arena compared to real life. I answered that it is not about the destination, it’s the journey that matters. I had been so focused on the completing the obstacle with Chrome that I did not appreciate the experience or Chrome’s companionship. From Chrome moving according to his own timing, I also learned that life and events do not happen in my time; I must be patient, learn to value the company of those around me and the overall experience.

Sarah Long, active duty military member and equine-assisted therapy client, said, “When I first started coming out here, I did not know what to expect, but I am so happy to have shared in this experience. It was hard for me to even understand or acknowledge the things



The author bonds with Chrome, one of Reins of H.O.P.E.’s “work Horses.”

going on that I needed to work on ... But from the moment you step into this arena the horses can read you. They see things in you that even you cannot. Working with them forces you to dig deeper into yourself. It is a life-changing experience.”

Luis, a technical sergeant with the U.S. Air Force and an equine-assisted therapy client, agreed with that assertion. “The program has allowed me and my daughter to begin the healing processes by showing us ways of dealing with (challenges), which for years impacted both of us in negative ways. We are learning strategies to deal with personal conflict by interacting with horses (as) opposed to confronting one another. The changes have been almost immediate in both my own life and in the life of my daughter.”

In addition to its Warriors program, Reins of H.O.P.E. also treats at-risk youth, families, individuals and groups. “We address problem-solving, respect, substance abuse, trust, relationships and communication skills,” said Sardonia.

H.O.P.E. For Warriors will host a fund-raising event on Oct. 2 at H.O.P.E.’s Ojai Valley Ranch. For more information on the event or to make an appointment, visit [www.reinsofhope-ojai.org](http://www.reinsofhope-ojai.org) or call (805) 797-5539. ☀



Marie Ortiz, co-founder of Reins of H.O.P.E., takes a minute to converse with her “employee,” Chrome, before beginning a therapy session.