



A Report to: A Chance of A Lifetime Qualitative Data Report

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A qualitative evaluation was conducted in May and June of 2020. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with program participants and board members; as a group and for purposes of confidentiality, all interviewed will be referred to as “participants” in this report. Participant contact data was provided by A Chance of A Lifetime. Intercept interviews yielded a 63% response rate; the average response rate for interviews is 50%. The image above includes words used by program participants to describe what they have learned, what they have improved, how they felt and the benefits of the program. Their comments were weighted, thus larger words occurred more often than the smaller words. In this report we will provide a summary of the key findings and include quotes from the participants. In addition, recommendations will be made based on the data collected.

Purpose: To obtain information and add to existing information using perspectives and insights from the participants themselves about the program.

Program participation: On average, participation in the program ranged from a one time event to years. The session average was 3.5 hours in length. The staff/participant ratio was normally 6 participants per 3 staff.

Summary of Key Themes

1 How are people finding out about COLT

- There were several ways in which participants heard about COLT. The key methods were word of mouth, Facebook, AA meetings, or the participant received a direct email about the program. Participants also reported having seen a flyer or obtained information at a booth.

2 Scheduling

- Scheduling was considered a simple process. Most participants called, sent an email or replied to an email or message via Facebook. The method described most frequently was having a participant send an email to the program, receive a quick response from the program and receive dates/times of availability.
- Scheduling included a release of liability and a photo release.

3 Participant Overall Experience

The overall experience in the program was a favorable and beneficial one. Program participants expressed their gratitude for the program, program staff, the horses and what they have learned. Most participants described the benefits as learning to become self-aware and vulnerable, set clear boundaries, learn to trust others, feel worthy of love, understanding, and acceptance, and learn to build relationships.

Participants enjoyed working with and getting to know “their” identified horse. Most understood why the particular horse was assigned to them or selected them. This was very interesting as participants described what horses had experienced during their abuse or trauma and were able to relate their experience to that of the horse. This created a bond and strengthened the relationship between the two and an understanding that they were paired in order to heal each other.

Most participants expressed having learned to be “true to self” and “let their guard down”. This was described as an essential process necessary for working with the horses and benefiting from the experience. Horses pick up energy and a lack of confidence and guarded emotions and that led to what participants described as “the horse will point out what needs to be worked on, they will act as a mirror” e.g. point out that boundaries need to be set or become self-assured.

- Participants felt that the program was tailored to their needs.
- They felt safe during the program and felt that the program staff were non-judgmental.
- Liberty training-when the horse is free to make his/her own decisions and walks without a rope or restraint is a key component of the program and was demonstrated to build trust, increase self-awareness, increase self-esteem, and increase quality of life. The process aided the participant in identifying what they needed to work on.
- Key outcomes included learning about one’s own body language, one’s self-imposed barriers, and detrimental self-imposed thinking. Participants took this information, processed it and this led to an increased self-esteem.
- The experience helps those in recovery connect with other women. This happens because the horses change the group dynamics. Most women reported that they did not have many friends and especially female friends prior to the experience.
- Most developed personal relationships with the other women in the program. A key finding since most mentioned that they could not and had no interest in forming relationships with other prior to participating in the program.
- Debriefing after each session was a key component and led to several benefits, including processing that takes place once they leave the Ranch.
- Group exercises such as poetry reading, meditation exercises, and sharing were all very grounding exercises which enhanced the experience.
- Most participants left the program engaged and wanting more.
- The program experience was described as calming and energy based.
- Participants appreciated both one-on-one sessions and group sessions.
- They found the program experience very grounding due to exposure to nature and to the horses as well as the quietness of the location.
- Participants leave the program with a feeling of gratitude that comes from reclaiming their sense of self, a sense of wholeness and humility from the experience. e
- Participants expressed their gratitude towards Erica Hess and her guidance.

Quotes:

- “Participating was like taking medicine that lasts for days and weeks at a time.”
- “Horses are an excellent mirror for emotions”

- “Erica is just a wonderful person; she supports my healing and my emotional recovery. Erica is loving, makes me feel really comfortable, she is a kind soul. She is very vulnerable. Her kindness and authenticity is allowing me to express my feelings.”
- “Erica asked me to be assertive, this being assertive made me uncomfortable. I then learned the difference between being assertive and mean-I didn’t understand the difference. It was confusing to me, overwhelming, I didn’t like to show how confused or awkward I felt. It was something I needed to work on. With the horse, what would have taken years, was identified in hours. I had no choice but to face my “character defects”.”
- “Erica possesses and expresses the talent, wisdom, and skills of a master teacher. She is patient, open hearted, loving, and kind, yet has clear boundaries.”
- “Horses are black and white- no passive aggressiveness, no extra politeness is needed. Horses don’t get their feelings hurt like humans do.”
- “I am an animal lover and I have a hard time with humans. I am more willing to go the extra mile for the horses. This program fills a gap that the AA program does not. It helps people who connect with nature and animals. It also helps you learn how to reconnect with and trust humans.”

4 Satisfaction with the Ranch

- Most participants were satisfied with the location of the Ranch. Few mentioned the distance as a barrier.
- Another barrier mentioned by few was the inclement weather- too hot in the summer and too cold in the winter.
- The Ranch was described as a “place to separate from real everyday life in order work on the self..”
- The Ranch was described as peaceful and beautiful due to the views of the mountains and the open space.
- Participants mentioned that the program is willing to listen to constructive criticism. They mentioned that Joost built an outhouse because over time there was an identified need. There was a true appreciation by participants who felt heard when outhouse was built.

“The Ranch is a wide-open space, expansive- not far. I love the windmill that can be seen from the pen at a distance, the mountains, the breeze, and the stillness.

5 Participant interactions with horses

- Interacting with the horses was described as safe by both participants with prior horse experience and those with no prior experience .
- Most participants had a difficult time expressing their interaction with the horses, yet were able to communicate a profound connection, deep core healing, and boundary setting lessons provided through the interaction.
- The horses selected to work with participants are experienced and mature, thus participants feel safe working with them.

- Participants felt they had received proper guidance upon arrival prior to working with the horses.
- Participants mentioned forms that they were required to complete which addressed risks of working with animals and the need to have their own insurance; most likely a liability form.
- There were a few mentions of participants who were uncomfortable with the size of the horses and described that the program handled those situations in a caring and compassionate manner. The program provided an opportunity for those participants to observe the interactions of others and to attempt the work with professional guidance once they were ready.

Quotes:

- “Horses will teach you how to assert your power without force.”
- “Horses are giant animals, but Erica talks about horse psychology and the language of horses and their energy. She gives constant guidance and helps you feel safe.”
- “We played games with the horses, I had to get the horse to wait and not eat a delicious treat until I told him to and gave him permission. I felt powerful and connected with the horse. It was really special. I noticed when the horse chose to follow my lead. It was very meaningful to me because one of my challenges is setting boundaries. It’s something I’m learning. I’m learning to say no and not feel bad for asking him to wait until told. I had to learn how to assert myself with no guilt.”

6 Program Benefits

There were several benefits to program participation. The key outcomes included increased self-esteem, healthy boundary setting, regained self-worth, desire to be vulnerable, being seen and accepted, and a desire to connect with people to name a few. The program is successful and has an abundance of benefits for those that participate.

- The program provides an opportunity for women to be seen, feel free to be vulnerable in a non-judgmental environment, to realize that they are good enough and worthy of a healthy and safe connection.
- The program has an authentic program leader that models what is expected of the participants.
- The program offers a safe space for all emotions.
- The program was said to provide an opportunity to ground oneself, to reduce stress, increase stability, increase mind-body connection, increase sense of self, a safe space to feel emotions, process and release trauma, increase connection, an opportunity to stop and still oneself and reconnect with self before proceeding.
- The program increased trust between the diad- human/horse and this trust was continued in daily living with other humans participants are in relation with.
- The program provides an opportunity to increase awareness that their self-respect yields respect from others.
- One major benefit is that most of the work takes place through the connection developed between the horses and the participant, thus participants do not experience retraumatization through the recounting of traumatic events.

- Participants thought that volunteers at the Ranch receive good training and were described as knowledgeable and very helpful.
- Participants expressed that one of the greatest benefits of participating in the program was understanding that boundaries form greater connection and trust.
- Program staff are passionate and love the work they do. They are committed and dedicated to their work.
- The program helps participants connect with other participants and form strong friendships and a safety net.

Quotes:

- “Participants become self-aware. Many participants arrive at the program due to a variety of reasons, sometimes it is due to sadness and despair that led to the development of a hardened shell and a lack of trust of people. Horses have no judgment and you start learning to feel worthy of love and of connection.”
- “Participants look physically different when they start the program and when they leave.”
- “In life, we learn that being vulnerable is not safe. That people use that against us. In order to work with the horses, we learn to be vulnerable and relearn that we can be safe while being vulnerable and that vulnerability builds connection and leads to healing.”
- “In life I cover up my pain with jokes, self bullying, and mainly tolerating the pain even when it makes my insides quake. Now I frequently ask myself- am I being honest with myself and others, with how I am feeling? Are my outsides matching my insides?”
- “If I don’t take up my space in a humble yet strong way, like a tree, then the horse is going to take up what was my space and not pay attention to me, will pull or circle around me. In life, I have to take up my space and show that I’m here and I matter, that my worth and my value take up space. If I don’t think I matter, others will tend to ‘step on me,’ not pay attention to me, and not take me seriously. If I don’t take myself seriously, no one else will either.”
- “I try real hard to cover up my trauma, just like I have done my whole life, trying to cover up the pain. I’ve been very successful at it. Yet with the horses, you are naked before them and this is the part of the grand beauty for which I am so absolutely grateful and humbled by these majestic creatures. In the presence of a horse, the pain can not be contained.”
- “There is something transformative that happens when you are with a horse.”
- “The program helps reconnect people with their still, wise voice inside that was silenced through life circumstances.”
- “No one showed or told me, when I was little, I am here for you, right here. I’m not going anywhere. I’m here just for you. I was on my own. By providing a sense of safety for the horse, I help my younger self feel safe and protected.”
- “I didn’t know how much I misunderstood power and how uncomfortable I was because I had never practiced it.”
- “Interacting with other participants you see some come guarded and closed, you learn to open up in order to live a happier life and you realize that you need to be around safe people.”
- “I have learned to trust myself to trust what I feel because I was fragile and unsure”

- “COLT has given me a reason to process my feelings and move through them. I’m an avoider, so it’s a relief to confront my feelings. I got to a place where no part of me wants to avoid the feelings. The horses are the solution I have been praying for.”
- “I’m practicing changing my insecurity, letting go of the façade, thinking that no one can see how fragile I really am. I’m much more genuine now.”
- “The horse communicates with us and if we don’t listen, we miss the healing of the soul”
- “I felt the connection with my horse and tears flowed. The horses give us the gift of connection and that starts the healing process. There is a knowing that ‘I’m going to be ok that I’m on the right path.’”
- “When women arrive, they come heart closed, guard up, scared, polite, confused but when they leave- the transformation is unreal.”
- “People transform into child-like self and their faces are full of joy. They remember their experiences a year later.”
- “Most people experience a reset of their nervous system.”
- “The program gives people space to process and to develop a relationship with people and horses based on their needs. People need to trust that they will have the experience that they need.”

7 What COLT brings to the community

A Chance of a Lifetime brings hope to the community. It provides heart-felt experiences that provide transformations to a variety of populations. Many of the populations it serves are women in transition, trauma impacted, and community members that have lost their way. COLT offers a non-invasive, non-judgemental, strength-based approach to addressing the invisible pain and trauma affecting many; a method of healing the soul.

- COLT brings trained and empathetic staff with a strong vision.
- COLT brings an opportunity to increase confidence in women.
- It is a transformative program.
- It brings horses that are tuned in to the people they are assisting and a diverse set of horses with distinct personalities.
- COLT offers warm inviting hosts- Erica and Joost
- It offers a clean, large and secluded Ranch
- An authentic program with authentic staff
- It brings intentionality of service- Erica and Joost are in service to humans and in service to horses.

“COLT supports healing through curiosity, gentleness and wonder.”

“COLT helps many people; with structure, this program can be replicated nationally.”