

NEWS & FEATURES

Dementia patients are welcomed to the wonderful world of horses.

by Brooke Goddard

Dementia saps a person's independence and creates many difficulties not only for the afflicted person, but for the family as well. Jill Hamilton knows well the toll dementia takes, as her mother is in the late stages of the disease and has to live in a special facility.



Jill and her business partner, Nancy Thomas, operate Millennium Farm in Portola Valley. They specialize in junior and amateur riders, and Nancy is a very competitive hunter rider. Millennium Farm regularly brings a large contingent to the Langer Equestrian Group Woodside shows and it was there, in conversation with LEG's Managing Director, that Jill's idea took shape.

"About five years ago, I approached Marnye [Langer] and explained how my mom lived in a

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facility for people with dementia,” Jill shared. “I thought it would be great if we could have them come to visit the horse show. Without a second thought, Marnye was like ‘Let’s do it.’ Melessa Lee and the LEG Team coordinated setting up space for us and made it really easy.” Fortunately, the administrators at the dementia facility embraced the idea and they coordinated the transportation and supervision of their residents for a special field trip.

“It’s often hard for people with dementia to get out and I felt like meeting horses, petting dogs, and watching horse show rounds would be a great experience,” Jill said. “A lot of these people have had animals in the past, so it was a fun way for them to reconnect to their love of animals.”

Last summer, one woman had a remarkable reaction to visiting with Terry Morrison’s horse, Emma Snow. “There was a woman who hadn’t talked in many years,” Jill recounted. “She had horses growing up and when she saw the horses, she came alive. She even talked for a couple of days after seeing the horses. It gave me goosebumps.”

“If you can give people with dementia a small chance to have some independence, it’s really special,” Jill added.

“I want everyone to understand that people with dementia can still have experiences in life that are meaningful.”