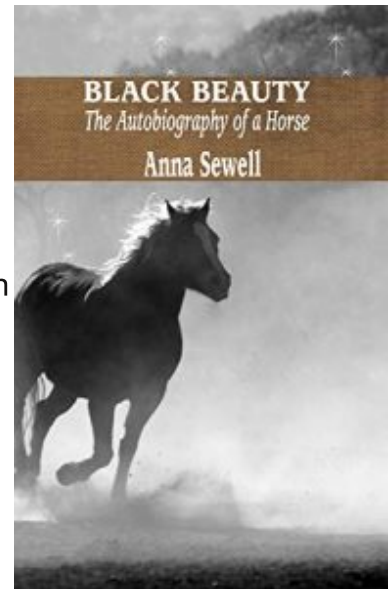


Newsletter - August 27, 2020

Janet Lawson, MFT | August 27, 2020

The first week of college classes has begun. Yes, summer 2020 is truly over and what a strange, surreal experience this has been. In mid-March we converted all our services to working remote. We usually plan several outdoor adventures during the summer: whitewater rafting, kayaking, camping, and long walks along the beach. But this summer it was Zoom, Zoom, Zoom and for fun, a little bit more Zooming. And yet, we managed to have a great time at Autistry. A time that was both entertaining and educational and we even found a way to do limited outdoor activities. For this I thank our great Autistry staff.

With the mandated COVID lockdown we began the summer with entirely online programming. Michaela and Reina designed an exciting and engaging Autistry Summer English curriculum. They chose the book, *My Side of the Mountain* by Jean Craighead George and created amazing activities and challenging academic assignments to augment the reading. This class was a huge success with several students and their families reporting a renewed interest in reading. We want to continue to encourage this love of reading, so this fall we created the Autistry Book Clubs. These clubs are less academic than the Autistry Summer English class but just as educational (in other words – no homework!). We kicked off the new clubs with *Black Beauty* by Anna Sewell. Sara is coordinating her virtual equestrian sessions from Cadence Farm with the reading material to bring the book to life.



For our more advanced readers, Dan led a class based on the program developed by Pixar and Disney: *Imagineering in a Box*. This course prepared our students for English 120 which many of them will be taking at College of Marin this fall. They practiced world creation, descriptive writing skills, and understanding story themes in the context of stories they chose and assigned works. The course videos and many support materials can be found online at the Kahn Academy. Dan adapted the course to help our students smoothly transitioned into the College of Marin English class. There will be 7 Autistry students in the English 120 class and they are ready to go!

By mid-June, the COVID restrictions had lifted slightly so our paid internship (PIP) crews returned to work at Cadence Farm. They groomed and exercised the horses, cleaned and refreshed the stalls, polished the tack, and generally supported the Square Peg staff. The interns also wrote wonderful essays in support of their favorite horses for the T.I.P. Thoroughbred of the Year Nominations. Sara Gardner provided remote equestrian tutorials via, yes, Zoom! These twice-a-week sessions kept those Autistry students who were not able to go to the stables connected to their equine friends – and the horses enjoyed the attention.





Another PIP crew was able to return to work with the rangers at the Marin County Parks. The crews are scheduled to rotate working at each of the 12 Marin County parks, spending 6 weeks at each one. The first crew worked at McNears Park and then Paradise Beach Park before we paused the program to prepare for the new school semester. Once the school rhythm is established the crews will return – and they are eager to get back to work.

The Park Rangers report that the Autistry crews have been a great support and help at the parks. The Autistry crews have learned to identify the various invasive species present in the parks and have helped the rangers both in maintaining the aesthetic landscaping of the parks as well as managing the balance of native plant life there.



The staff also organized weekly small group hikes in and around local neighborhoods. The students and staff practiced recommended COVID safety measures – wearing masks, staying at least 6 feet apart, and routinely washing their hands. The mentors met up with the students in their own neighborhoods, so transportation was kept to a minimum. When rides were needed, they were provided by family members or designated drivers. These outings were essential for everyone’s mental health! These neighborhood hikes were another lesson learned this summer and one that we will continue throughout the year. The anxiety brought about by the COVID uncertainty only grows stronger when one is socially isolated.

We have been thinking a lot about the long-term life goals of our Autistry students. We have seen how important a good basic education is to the development of a strong personal identity and how productive, meaningful work sustains and nourishes that identity. Autistry is excited and hopeful about the movement to create the Autism Full Employment Act of 2021. And we are happy to take part in the discussion as we all explore employment options. To read more about the Autism Full Employment Act please read the article by Michael Bernick posted in Forbes earlier this week.



Stay safe, stay well, and stay in touch!

-Janet, Dan, Sara, Matt and the entire Autistry Team