



*Changing  
STRIDES*  
A program of  
Shangri-La Therapeutic Academy of Riding



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## Changing Strides Life Skills Program – Narrative

### ★ ORGANIZATION INFORMATION

Shangri-La Therapeutic Academy of Riding (STAR) is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) corporation dedicated to providing quality instruction in therapeutic horseback riding to disabled persons and those with challenging needs. *STAR's mission is to foster personal achievement by providing challenging therapeutic experiences using horse related activities for persons with disabilities or other special challenges.*

STAR began in 1987 as founder and executive director, Lynn Petr's Therapeutic Recreation Master's thesis project at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. The challenge was to introduce a new and unique program to think outside the box when it came to an alternative treatment to enhance traditional therapy. The program started with five riders, one horse, three volunteers and one employee (Ms. Petr). Currently STAR serves 139 riders each week, ages 4 to 60+, has 11 NARHA certified instructors, over 265 volunteers and 24 horses/ponies. STAR serves 9 counties in East Tennessee and 2 counties in Middle Tennessee.

### ★ PROGRAM

Over the past decade, more and more attention has been given to the problems associated among youth who struggle with complex issues and scenarios that are brought on by peers, and difficult environments. One goal for many years at STAR was to expand our current program to address the needs of our community's at-risk youth. In 2007, we launched the A-Team program. The future success of disadvantaged youth is dependent on programs that provide leadership and growth opportunities. STAR's *Changing Strides* program provides the tools for at-risk youth to better manage their lives and foster positive relationships while teaching problem solving, communication, and social skills, as well as developing a commitment to community, anger management, positive identity and self worth, positive values, leadership skills, academic achievement, defuse peer dependence and expand life skills.

The *Changing Strides* curriculum consists of equine caretaker activities, budgeting, life skill lessons, horse handling/psychology, and riding skills. Throughout the class session, students engage in appropriate decision making with cause and effect, which the horses demonstrate in a very concrete manner. Our NARHA certified STAR instructors work to provide students with an exciting, educational and safe experience by incorporating one of the values from our "Strides" to Success statement each week, Safety, Trust, Respect, Integrity, Dedication, Excellence and Sensitivity, as well as Citizenship and Public Speaking.

STAR provides small group sessions, setting boundaries and expectations, multi-sensory stimulation and the immediate direct feedback provided by the horse. Through the *Changing Strides* Life Skills Program, we provide students with redirection, guidance, acceptance and kindness. In return, we ask for a commitment to learning from the students, as well as performance-based feedback from students, teachers and the school social worker. The *Changing Strides* program serves six students for an hour and a half once a week for two (2) ten week sessions (fall and spring) from the Lenoir City High School Alternative (A-Team). The majority of these students are in the alternative school

for violating the Lenoir City School District Zero Tolerance Policy. The students who participate in the A-Team program have made poor choices and are in need of redirection and a fresh learning environment.

Through STAR's partnership with the Lenoir City School District, we are able to provide cost efficient services to meet the needs of at-risk students. Intervention provided at this age is vital if they are to become mature, productive citizens. After viewing the curriculum and observing A-Team classes, Lenoir City School District representatives agreed the A-Team program is a valuable asset to the challenged youth in their school system and once again, collaborated with STAR for 2009-2010 school year. In addition, they sought a grant to pay for a second group to participate from the High School.

Horses are a great incentive for youth participants, as they tend to accept and be non-judgmental; therefore, allowing participants to be more open, trusting, cooperative, and appreciative. Although many people do not have direct contact with equines, even the youngest child appreciates the strength and power of a horse. Those qualities are used to teach life skills for introvert types as well as over confident youth. With those participants that are shy, withdrawn or have low self esteem, horses, unlike other domesticated animals, provide the tools to overcome areas of inadequacy. Horses also promote heightened awareness of choices they've made to those youth that display bullying, or condescending behaviors. Reality checks come to life while learning from horses.

STAR instructors work with students by presenting real solutions to everyday situations. They present these solutions in a way that the youth can both understand and remember. Through the *Changing Strides* Life Skills Program, students learn that although making good decisions is not always easy, doing so will help give them more opportunities, independence and self-respect. Our community's future lies in the hands of our youth.

#### ★ OBJECTIVES

The ultimate measure of success for the *Changing Strides* Life Skills program are students who show improved school participation and attendance, changed attitudes toward peers through the development of positive self-worth and wise decision making skills, as well as increased interaction between participants and the horses. Our objective is to provide quality services for as many at-risk students as we can.

#### ★ EVALUATION

An evaluation of the *Changing Strides* program will be done through a culmination of processing activities including pre-test and post-test by students, observed behavior, attendance, grades, and attitude recorded by high school teachers. STAR instructors, interns and assistants will alternately provide weekly evaluations.

#### ★ FINANCIAL

To sustain the program STAR will collaborate with the organizations we serve. STAR currently has four fundraising events, Bridles & Blue Jeans, Riders' Ride-A-Thon, STAR State Horse Show for the Disabled and Hoofing & Hiking. In addition, a newsletter with an appeal for donations is mailed three times a year, providing much of the private annual funding for the STAR program. Grants, corporate donations and civic contributions balance out the fund-raising.

The service fee funds a small portion of the two ten-week sessions, which covers only a fraction of the actual cost of the lessons. In order to continue providing an affordable life changing experience for these challenged students, we turn to individuals, businesses, civic groups and others to help us continue the special work that we do.