

**DAGWould?  
Board Meeting Minutes  
November 19, 2020**

Location: Remote/via Zoom

Members in Attendance:

Mark Brogan, Assistant Chair  
Shazi Ahmad, Secretary  
Nancy Brown  
Stanley Taylor  
April Tomlin

Others in Attendance:

Cindy Pionke, Strategic Facilities Engineer/ADA 504 Coordinator for Knox County

Lynn Klimas Petr, Founder and Executive Director of Shangri-La Therapeutic Academy of Riding (STAR)

Myers Morton, Knox County Law Department

Call to Order: 3:05 (EST)

**WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS**

-Cindy called the meeting to order and recognized members in attendance.

-April introduced the guest speaker, Lynn Klimas Petr, the founder and executive director of STAR. Lynn started STAR 33 years ago with one horse and now serves 11 counties. It is available for those 4 years old to seniors with physical, mental, or emotional disabilities. April said she has volunteered at STAR for going on 10 years now. April thanked Lynn for participating in the DAGWould? meeting.

**PRESENTATION BY LYNN KLIMAS PETR-founder of STAR**

-Lynn thanked April for the introduction and asked DAGWould? members to jump in if they had any questions.

-Lynn said that STAR was her master's thesis project from The University of Tennessee; her bachelor's degree is in special education and her master's degree in therapeutic recreation (of which she was the first program

graduate). She said starting STAR has been a long and difficult road because in the early stages, many people didn't think it was a logical idea. Instead, people thought it was a liability and that no one would allow her to put disabled people on or around horses because it was too dangerous.

-Lynn started working at a special education school and had a wonderful experience-as well as a really good education on a variety of disabilities-and the conditions that accompany various disabilities. She said she was able to use what she learned there and extrapolate it to provide for accommodations-should one of those issues arise when she is working with an individual on a horse.

-One of the first things Lynn said she had to do was to create a mission statement for STAR, which is to "foster personal achievement by providing therapeutic experiences using horse related activities for persons with disabilities or other special challenges." She said the "other special challenges" language was added on when it became clear that others who didn't have a disability, per se, also benefited from STAR's services.

-STAR is an accredited program with PATH (the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International).

-Lynn told the committee that STAR's largest program is "Therapeutic Riding," which pairs children and adults with a horse to learn riding skills. With this program, participants work on balance, coordination, and core strength, among other things. She showed the committee one child who doesn't sit up straight unless he is in a saddle on a horse. She said that one thing different about STAR is that their riders groom and care for the horses- rather than just showing up to ride. This gives the participant the feeling of caring for someone/something, it increases their vocabulary, and helps develop range of motion and muscles.

-STAR focuses on volunteers being available to help participants, but not to do everything for them.

-Lynn said that "Changing Strides" is a program where, each day, one of the following words is focused on: Safety, Trust, Respect, Integrity, Dedication, Excellence, and Sensitivity. She said that it has morphed over the years, by including drug and alcohol rehabilitation, but they still use the same basic curriculum. It is relationship driven and about respect, as well as learning how to communicate with someone who doesn't speak English-in STAR's case, the horses.

-Lynn told the committee that the staff and volunteers organize and help set everything up, but the horse is the one doing the teaching.

-Lynn said that the “Heroes and Horses” program was started in 2010 and it has 2 phases:

1. Mounted, where riding skills are learned, and
2. Ground work, which is about learning to communicate with the horse and earning its trust.

-April asked Lynn what types of individuals are in this group and how it benefits them. Lynn replied that most participants have PTSD, while others have physical challenges stemming from their service to the country. This group of people have been the most eager to come back, post-Covid-19 and really exhibited the positive impact being around horses brings them-both physically and emotionally. Lynn shared the story of a participant who, because of his hyper vigilance, could not go to Walmart during the day (he would go at midnight). However, after working with horses and finding his safe zone, he called the STAR offices from Walmart at 2:00 one afternoon. She said this breakthrough was so big for him because it showed how one can extrapolate what they learn in one circumstance to other areas of their lives.

-Mark told the committee that he has been involved with STAR for 8 years. He said he had a long road of recovery from being in a coma to a wheelchair, and that getting involved with the Heroes and Horses program gave him a lot of confidence. He said that the hard work that he put in the program led him to independence in so many areas. He also said that whether PTSD, or you’re just having a bad day, that being around the different personalities of horses is just amazing. Mark said that the other participants and volunteers provides a little family atmosphere for him and that STAR is one of the highlights of his week.

-Mark said that he gets physical and occupational therapy, as well as improved core strength through his sessions at STAR. Lynn thanked Mark for sharing his experiences.

-April also noted how therapeutic it is to just be around horses as a volunteer. She also mentioned that there are volunteer opportunities available if anyone is interested.

-Lynn told the committee about the “Minis in Motion program.” This effort involves mini horses, which have been desensitized and trained, that go into assisted living facilities (particularly to visit with residents who have dementia). She said the residents often light up and tell stories of their own. For example, Lynn said that when one resident saw a horse inside, she jumped up and yelled out that “horses don’t belong inside!” She said that she apologized to a staff member and asked if she needs to leave. The staff member responded, “You stay right there! We have not heard her speak since she has been here.” It turned out that she had a horse earlier in her life-but

she did not allow it in the house. This interaction got this resident talking and, going forward, it provided a way for the staff to relate to her.

-Lynn said that “Reflections” is a newer program that was started last year to help families who care for their loved ones at home. She said during these sessions the caregiver can either participate or leave their loved one to interact with trained STAR staff members and the horses. These sessions at STAR can be tailored to individuals and their particular interests. This program hasn’t taken off quite yet, so Lynn encouraged the committee to let people know of this program. She said it costs \$5.00 per hour session.

-Lynn asked the committee if they had any questions.

-April asked if Lynn talked about riders and under what circumstances someone is able to participate.

-Lynn said that it runs the gambit, but: the participant must be at least 4 years old, their condition can either be one they were born with or developed later in life-such as cerebral palsy, down’s syndrome, a developmental delay, autism (which is their largest participant group), multiple sclerosis, strokes, head injuries, spinal cord injuries, etc. She said they can accommodate a big variety of disabilities, but there are restrictions, such as weight, uncontrolled seizure activity, and rods in one’s spine to name a few. She said they are very conservative when it comes to who is able to do what because they have to protect that individual participant, as well as others in the area.

-Nancy asked how STAR is funded and how most of their clients come to STAR.

-Lynn said that most participants get involved via word of mouth, but physicians, physical and occupational therapists, and the VA make a lot of referrals to them. She said there is currently a waiting list.

-Lynn said that STAR is funded through \$40 lesson fees (except for participants of the Heroes Program). Actual cost is \$126/hour. If a participant has a financial need they can apply for a sponsorship-where they pay \$20 per lesson and provide 3 hours of sweat equity back to STAR. She said staff members have to work twice as hard for these sessions so they request help cleaning, making treats for the concession stand, or whatever needs to be done.

-Lynn also said STAR is also funded through grants, fundraisers (during normal non-Covid years), as well and private donations.

-Cindy asked how wide of an area STAR serves and what is the nearest STAR competitor.

-Lynn said that STAR serves 11 surrounding counties but does not have a restricted radius.

-Lynn noted there is a program called "Saddle Up" in Franklin, TN and is considered a sister program to STAR, as Lynn helped them get started years ago. Per their bylaws, they only work with children though.

-Lynn also said there is a program in the Tri-Cities called "Small Miracles."

-Lynn said there are only a few accredited programs in TN-one in Memphis, 2 in Nashville, and a couple more in the area.

-Due to the risk associated with riding horses, Lynn stressed the importance that this type of therapy and activity be accredited, and that those looking to participate search for accredited organizations only-to help mitigate as much risk as possible. The Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH) is responsible for accrediting facilities and they follow stringent guidelines. Lynn said that she is actually a site visitor and accredits other programs.

-April asked Lynn to talk about STAR's facilities and where they are located.

-Lynn said the Lenoir City location is 63 acres and will soon have 30 horses on site.

-She also told the committee that in 2016, STAR was given a 47-acre lakeside farm off of John Sevier Highway-complete with a house, an arena and a barn. She said that the office building was built in 1960 so it is not ADA compliant. However, they have a long-term plan, with a capital campaign, to make it accessible. They estimate that it will take \$2 million to do this properly

-Lynn said their hope is to work with more inner city and special education students.

-Cindy asked where STAR's horses come from and what STAR looks for in their horses?

-Lynn replied that they do not purchase horses and that the horses are either leased or donated. Leased horses are from horse owners who love their horse dearly but don't want to relinquish ownership; so, STAR brings them in and cares for them as if they are their own. If they get too old or develop arthritis, they then have a home to go back to. Donated horses, on the other hand, belong to STAR and when something happens to where they can no longer use the horses for therapy, STAR has to find a retirement home for them, which can be challenging.

-Lynn told the committee that because of their reputation of caring for their horses, STAR receives horses and referrals from all parts of the country. She said there is a 3 part screening process to make sure that the horses are in acceptable condition to partake in their mission. The first step is over the phone; the second step is a home visit to see what their nature and temperament are; and the third step involves the horses coming out to STAR facilities, where they are introduced to wheelchairs, squeaky toys, bubbles, etc.-all the things they might encounter at STAR that a typical horse would not. Ultimately, the horse decides if STAR is acceptable to them. Once a horse makes it through the screening process, STAR wants to keep them so money and time are invested in their care and to help keep them pain-free via joint injections, supplements, and chiropractic care.

-Cindy asked how STAR determines who is able to participate in its program?

-Lynn replied that they have an initial form they do over the phone-where they ask the potential participant's weight and type of disability. Depending on their answer, the participant can either attend one of the programs mentioned above or, if it is determined they cannot ride a horse, they can attend the "Ground Program," where they walk behind horses, help with horse care, grooming, etc. This screening is done on the front end so the participant is aware what programs they will attend beforehand.

-Very few people who want to participate are turned away due to the alternate programming available.

-Cindy asked Lynn about the problems she alluded to with regards to Knox County Schools.

-Lynn replied that a legal situation might arise where a student is allergic to horses, but rather than parcel out and separate what students can participate, Knox County Schools take an all or nothing approach.

-She said it was disheartening because educators don't work that way.

-She said there is a lot one can learn without touching a horse.

-Lynn also said STAR wanted to take mini horses to the schools, as they have recently been short changed on outings and field trips. She said they could have covered 5 classes in a day, including history, geography, math, and science. However, the Knox County Schools wouldn't allow this due to the pandemic.

-Shazi asked Lynn whether she would be able to participate in one of STAR's riding programs, given her disability (she is a T3 paraplegic with Harrington rods fused in her spine).

-Lynn said that she would not be able to ride because a rider's spine needs to be able to move with the horse's motion. There is also

the possibility she could fall, which would not be good. April noted that Shazi could participate in one of the other non-riding programs though.

-Lynn told the committee about an upcoming volunteer training on Saturday, December 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020 at the Lenoir City location from 9am-1pm.

-Mark told the committee that just being around the horses and seeing their different personalities, as well as learning to communicate with them and their body language is an amazing thing. He and April said one doesn't have to ride to establish a relationship with a horse.

-April said she enjoys being around the mini horses and told the committee about an experience she had at a facility. She said a caregiver brought the resident outside to where the minis were and since it was close to Halloween, the horses were dressed up (one was dressed up as a lady bug, complete with Build-a-Bear shoes). When the resident was wheeled outside and saw the horse, she literally started shaking because she was so excited. April said it was just amazing to watch.

-Lynn said the facilities welcome STAR's visits so much because their residents have been locked up for so long due to Covid-19 restrictions. Since they could not take the horses inside, some residents watched from inside, often writing messages on their windows and touching the horses through the windows. Lynn also said that one facility called STAR and asked them to come out since it was a beautiful day and the residents could come outside and socially distance from each other. The simple act of touching the horses meant so much to these residents.

-Shazi asked how facilities get on STAR's list to request visits.

-Lynn replied they just need to call.

-April said that she started having staff meetings at STAR so that her staff is aware of what services are available. She also said that one of the senior centers took a field trip to STAR and the seniors were so thrilled with the experience.

-Mark told the committee that every year STAR does a show where participants display what they have learned throughout the year. He said it is really rewarding and a lot of fun. Shazi asked when this usually occurs and Lynn replied usually in August-at the end of the summer session.

-Lynn thanked the DAGWOULD? Committee for having her and invited members to visit STAR in the next few months.

## **APPROVAL OF SEPTEMBER MINUTES**

- Mark submitted the written minutes from the September 17, 2020 meeting. He asked if everyone had a chance to read over them and if they had any questions or concerns.
- Mark asked for a motion to approve the September minutes. A motion to approve was made by April and seconded by Nancy.
- Mark asked each member, individually, if they were in favor of approving the September minutes.
- A vote to approve the September minutes was held and the motion carried.

## **DAGWOULD? MEMBERSHIP**

### RENEWAL CONFIRMATION

- Cindy said that she will submit the renewal of committee members to the County commission for approval.

### SUGGESSTIONS TO REPLACE TIM ADAMS

- Cindy asked committee members to email her with any suggestions they might have by mid-December.
  
- Cindy said that she has not yet posted the 2021 DAGWould? meeting dates yet, but the next meeting will be on February 18, 2021 at 3:00pm.

## **UPDATE ON ELECTRONIC MEETINGS (WITH MYERS MORTON, KNOX COUNTY LAW DEPARTMENT)**

- Per Lee Polk's (from the open records counsel) email dated October 5, 2020, Myers Morton told the committee that its meetings are subject to Gov. Lee's executive order suspending the rule requiring a quorum to be present at a location (and the location being where the notice gives the meeting location). He said that once the Governor stops this, a quorum must be present at the meeting location given in the notice.
  
- Mr. Morton also noted that Lee Polk's email stated that permission to continue electronic meetings (as the committee previously discussed) is only an option for elected member board meetings.
  
- Therefore, when the executive orders expire, DAGWould? must have its meetings at the location listed in the notice and a quorum must be present there.
  
- Cindy said that she and Anna had talked to set the agenda for the next meeting and one of the things they talked about for a potential speaker was to ask someone from the design team working on Knox County Schools and



what they are doing to help make the schools more accessible. She said it would be nice to hear locations they are targeting and how the DAGWould? committee can help provide input.

-April said that she would be happy to help find out who this would be. Cindy said that she can also help contact someone.

-Nancy said she thinks this is much needed so they are aware of things they don't always consider. It is much better to get out in front of issues, rather than retrofitting problems. Shazi agreed, especially since the committee saw all the mistakes that were made at a recently built senior center.

-Cindy updated the committee that one of the places they visited, the Karns Senior Center, is getting the new accessible doors that the committee had recommended.

## **ADJOURNMENT**

-With no other business to discuss, the meeting was adjourned at 4:27 PM.