



Equine assisted therapy & Movement Method

An All Ireland Centre for Excellence at Castle Leslie

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A NOTE FROM SAMANTHA LESLIE

Since childhood, I have always been fascinated by how the human brain processes information. Even now, we are only starting to understand how they process information and feelings and what effects our brain, both positively and negatively.

Having struggled through nine schools by the age of 15 and watched my older brother being moved from one mental health facility to another, horses were my refuge and my rescuers. They are natural healers, kind and emotionally intelligent creatures whose movement has such an effect on our brain, that I always recognised, but never understood.

The pursuit of knowledge has been a life-long passion of mine. My aim has always been to help people. There is enormous value in helping someone learn the life skills which allow them to live their best life and process the traumas of their past which have negatively impacted their lives and those around them.

Through these years of research I came across the amazing work of Rupert Isaacson. Rowan, his son, was diagnosed autistic at the age of two and a half. The charming, animated child had ceased speaking. He retreated into himself for hours at a time, screamed inconsolably for no apparent reason, flapped his arms and babbled. Today, Rowan, now in his early twenties, lives independently and has made significant improvements in his verbal communication skills. All this as a result of equine assisted therapy.

Rupert has since introduced me to David Doyle, an Irish entrepreneur who sold his printing business, and joined St. Josephs Foundation to help them improve the facilities use by his autistic daughter Caroline. His centre in Liskennett has produced some outstanding results and is at full capacity, with a growing wait list. No doubt his second centre, in Kanturk, will do the same.

Over the last 18 months, I have visited the therapy centres in Liskennett, Child Vision in Dublin, Steward Care in Kildoon and the Middletown Centre for Autism support. I have met with Northern Irish organisations including One Equine and collaborated on proposal for Boom Hall in Derry.

I have travelled to Singapore to see the ground-breaking Enabling Village and their makers shop. I have also attended medical conferences at the Eastern Virginia Medical School led by Temple Grandin.

Every six months, I host an overnight think tank session for key people in the space to see identify gaps and how we fill them. This is how the the idea to create a ground-breaking centre at Castle Leslie came about. It will be a place to meet the needs not just of service users, but also parents, siblings and carers. It will focus on training, specifically for trainers in the field and the horses used in the therapies across the country. Another central pillar of the centre will be an open-source research centre.

Recent studies have shown the positive effects of equine therapies on people with PTSD. In the border counties of Ireland there are considerable legacy issues from the 30 years of the Troubles. There is also emerging research into the positive impacts of un-mounted therapies on survivors of domestic violence and those suffering from associated stress disorders and addictions.

There is a global movement growing for Equine Assisted, Movement Method and Nature based therapies, and we could to be a key part of this.

What I find fascinating is the combination of the formal health care structures and the influences of the entrepreneurial mind. This is where I believe real impactful change can happen.

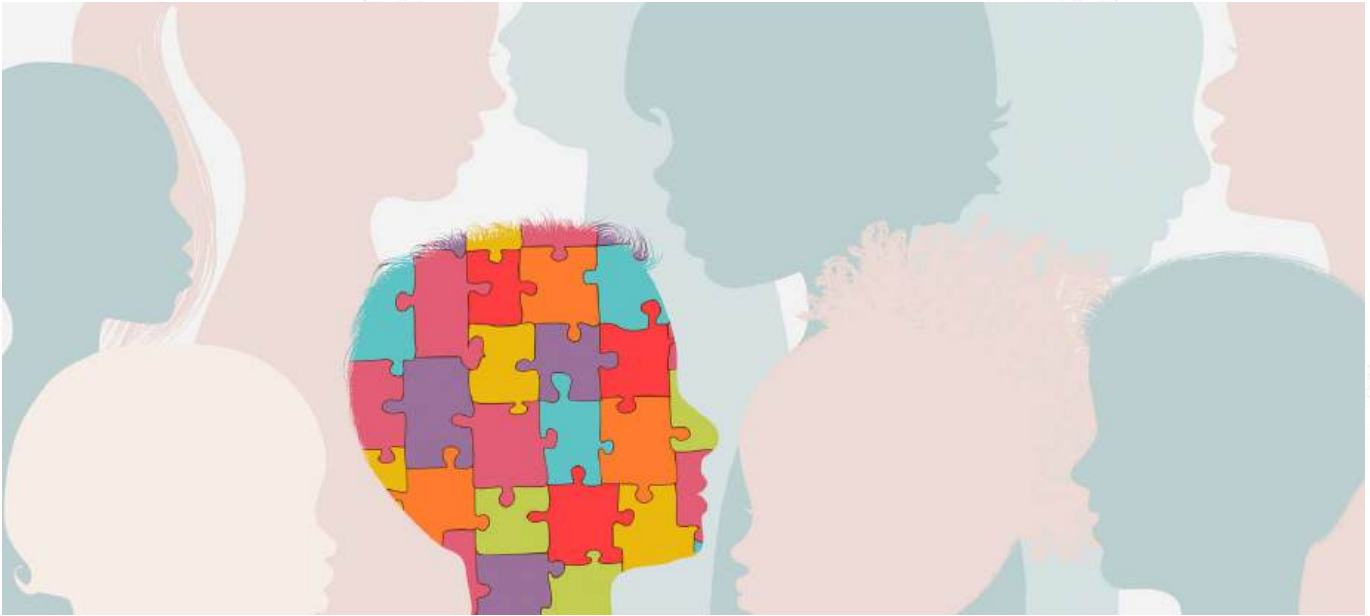
Now its time to put words in to action and deliver a new type of centre for Equine Assisted and Movement therapies, with multiple outcomes. Would you like to be part of this journey to?



SAMANTHA LESLIE

CURRENT CUSTODIAN OF CASTLE LESLIE





Some stats

In the US, autism prevalence has increased 178% since 2000.

In the UK, 8 in 10 autistic people are thought to have a mental health condition, autistic adults are 9 times more likely to die by suicide & autistic children are 28 times more likely to consider suicide.

The Irish health service estimate 8,893 are currently on the waiting list for assessment - with 6,963 children waiting for more than three months.

In Ireland the average waiting list for autism assessment is 18-24 months in Ireland.

In 2023, 700 jobs were unfilled in the provision of services for autism in Ireland.

In Ireland 1 in 65 children is diagnosed with autism.

85% of autistic individuals in Ireland are either unemployed or underemployed.

In the U.S., about 4 in 100 boys and 1 in 100 girls have autism. Boys are nearly 4 times more likely to be diagnosed with autism.

In Ireland, four times as many males have autism (79%) recorded as a primary disability compared with females (21%),

In 2014/2015, the average cost to families of autistic children was €28,464.89 per child per year in Ireland, due to access private services, loss of income and informal care.

Anxiety disorders were diagnosed in 20.1% of autistic Irish adults compared with 8.7% of population without autism.

How can we help?

We believe that a person's needs are best met by a person whose needs are met. While the Irish Health Services Executive offer a range of practical supports to children with autism and their carers, through the Children's Disability Network Team (CDNT), We see an opportunity to provide additional supports which can have a life changing impact.

Once a hub of activity, the now disused yard in a sleepy corner of the Estate can be restored and given a new lease of life. Set in rolling fields and mature woodland, it is the perfect location to create a centre offering a range of services and support.

A shortage of skilled professionals

While there are a handful of great trainers in Ireland, there are many more looking to train. There is a lack of training programmes and spaces which is in turn restricting the growth of the field. We can offer training and CPD to those in the field.

A shortage of trained horses & ponies

For the current centres and those in development, sourcing appropriate and properly trained horses is challenging. We can provide full training for horses to be used in the provision of therapies.

A lack of structured collaboration

Already in this field there are extraordinarily talented and resourceful people. However, they often work in isolation with no way to collaborate. We will become that space to provide opportunities for all island collaboration, idea sharing and supports.

Little co-ordination of scientific research

There is a clear need of accessible resources and research for carers, service providers and other stakeholders across of the field of autism services. Currently this information is fragmented and scattered. We will create an open-source platform accessible to all.

Shortage of places for families & carers

Among the many challenges of caring for a person with additional needs is impact on the wider family. Travelling and taking a break can be a considerable undertaking. The creation of a designed restful accommodation will help facilitate this.

THE HORSEBOY METHOD

Primarily a mounted approach for younger autistic children, it delivers oxytocin through rhythmic hip rocking on a specially trained horse.

Oxytocin calms the nervous system, brings down levels of cortisol and opens the learning receptors of the brain.

In addition, the games we then play provide the brain protein BDNF (brain derived neurotrophic factor) which is the building block of neuroplasticity.

The method has the support of neuroscientists Dr Robert Naviaux and Dr Allyson Muotri of the University of California. Studies have found the method both efficient and effective for even the more severe forms of autism.



THE MOVEMENT METHOD



The Movement Method offers the same positive brain and body effects as Horse Boy Method, while using play equipment, the natural environment and even furniture in a room.

It can be delivered in any setting: home, school, therapy centre or playground. It simultaneously supports better mental health and learning at the same time.

A recently published PhD from Grand Canyon University in the USA found that children with learning and behavioural difficulties in German schools improved significantly both in terms of academics and behaviour and teachers delivering the Method suffered less burnout.



TRAIN THE HORSE

Currently centres train their own horses and ponies. This occupies a considerable amount of time which could be spent offering therapies.

A lack of trained horses also means that for those with the facilities to undertake therapies at home, it is almost impossible to buy or loan a trained therapy animal.

Our proposal includes the creation of a training centre for horses which will source, train and, when needed, rehome therapy horses.

This will ensure that suitable horses are being used for therapies, that the training is to a proper standard and that valuable centre time is not being used training horses.

TRAIN THE TRAINER

Currently, there is no centralised training centre for training trainers or providing continued professional development. Training on site in the centres can result in the closure of the centre for the day or a disruption to services. This is often not possible when services are already stretched to maximum capacity.

Using our previous experience as National Training Centre for the Department of Education courses for equestrian training for people with long-term unemployment, we understand what it takes to provide excellence in training space and support.

We aim to provide training for people who want to work in the equine therapy and to provide opportunities for those already trained in the equine field to transition to equine therapy.



SUPPORT, LEARNING AND RESEARCH SPACES

The centre will include a state of the art research and teaching space.

This will be a base for research and researchers, with an open access research platform to disseminate research and provide resources for parents, carers, academics and service providers.

This centre will include a small versatile teaching and lecture spaces, play therapy suites, counselling rooms, sensory areas and training facilities.





Castle Leslie Estate is just 80 minutes from Dublin and 60 minutes from Belfast. It is nestled on the border with Northern Ireland, with more than half of its hinterland in Northern Ireland. This means the Estate is ideally situated to establish an all-island centre for excellence for equine assisted therapy.

With 1,000 acres including woodland walks, lakes and designated trails, the Estate is an ideal location for a retreat for all the family, including parents and siblings.



OUR PARTNERS

At Castle Leslie we recognise the need for collaboration and partnership to make a real impact. We are working with a number of partners to establish a model of best practice and facilities.

All our partners are committed to providing services and supports of the highest possible standard, embracing new innovations, research and therapies.

1. St Joseph's Foundation, Equine Therapy Centre, Liskennett, Limerick
2. Childvision, National Campus, Drumcondra, Dublin
3. Stewarts Care, Regional Hub, Kilcloon, Meath
4. One Equine Trust, Bangor, Co Down, Northern Ireland
5. Middletown Centre for Autism, Middletown, Armagh, NI.
6. St Joseph's Foundation, Equine Therapy Centre, Kanturk - In development
7. Toghermore Equine Therapy Centre, Tuam, Co Galway - In development
8. Boom Hall, Derry, NI - In development.



GROUNDED THERAPIES – PTSD & DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The Journal of Rehabilitation Research & Development (JRRD) explains, “As prey animals, horses are hypervigilant until they learn they are not in danger. Unlike with many dogs, who trust unconditionally, horses require humans to work to gain their trust. Because of their own hypervigilance, [those] with PTSD easily understand and can relate to the trust and hypervigilance in a horse.”

“Other symptoms of PTSD are emotional numbness, a feeling of “not being in one’s body”, and a lack of awareness of body language, so [those] with PTSD learn to become more aware of their bodies, their body language, and expression of emotion through their bodies. They must become aware of the body language of the horse, which helps them become aware of others’ body language too.”

These shared tendencies between horses and those with PTSD – from being oversensitive, easily startled, hypervigilant to danger, and so forth – mean healing can come from a common ground that another human may not be able to give, especially not in a medical setting such as the hospital.

Known as equine therapy, or equine-assisted therapy, horses are able to promote spiritual, physical, psychological and occupational healing in post-traumatic stress disorder sufferers. Non-threatening, trusting and open relationships can be built with these connections breeding further positive feelings of patience, love, respect, safety and empathy. Equine therapy is found to reduce levels of anxiety and stress, improve moods, create a sense of peace and contentment, among other benefits.



Equine facilitated mentoring

Building on the success of similar programmes in the US, which partner survivors of domestic violence and sufferers of PTSD with mentors who have personal experience in the power of equine mentoring and its ability to help those who are suffering.

Given that the current unemployment rate of people with autism in Ireland is 85%, the centre also aims to create an avenue which may result in direct employment or provide valuable experience to ease the process of joining the workforce.

The farmyard & Estate



**THE DESIGN –
A PERSONS NEEDS ARE BEST MET BY A PERSON WHOSE NEEDS
ARE MET.**



LEGEND:

1. HORSEBOY & EQUINE THERAPIES CENTRE
2. FUTURE TRADITIONAL SKILLS CENTRE IN OLD MODEL FARM
3. NEW ACCESS ROAD
4. EXISTING ACCESS ROAD
5. CARPARK
6. 'THE BANKS', PLAY FIELD.
7. SENSORY WALK CREATED AROUND 'ROSEMOUND' FIELD.
8. HORSE PADDOCKS
9. TRAILS AND PATHS IN WOOD.
10. EXISTING SELF CATERING IN THE OLD STABLES
11. POTENTIAL FUTURE RESIDENTIAL CABINS

DESIGN BY ADAM PAVOY
MAKOWER ARCHITECTS

Meet the team



Samantha Leslie
Fundraiser & BHSII trainer



Rupert Isaacson
- Horseboy



David Doyle
- Liskennett



Kezia Sullivan
- EAS researcher



Robin



Betty



Ronaldo

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