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Horses Lead Outdoor Experiential Leadership Workshops

"If they don't touch it, they won't learn it." That motto is posted on the walls of many preschools, right above the sand boxes, the mud pits, and play dough bins. It is a simplified version of the theory behind experiential learning. When coupled with the great outdoors, this concept has become the basis for the increasingly popular field of outdoor experiential learning. The three women who run Saddle Sojourns, of Valley Center, Ca., have added horses to this mix with great success.

Whether they've come to Saddle Sojourns as individuals pursuing personal goals, or as employees in corporate team building seminars, participants typically spend three to four hours in the saddle each day. The four-day sessions are designed to be challenging and fun and are conducted with sensitivity to the skill level of each rider. "We are helping people build their self awareness and increase their awareness of others," says Saddle Sojourn's Ivy Gordon. "We help them challenge their self imposed limitations and expand their capacity for resilience and risk



taking." Creating a partnership with their horse, she continues, "gives people a situation where they learn in both a very visceral and cognitive level how to work as an effective team, building trust and communication and translating learning into action." Horses also offer the added bonus of adventure. "The outcome is uncertain,

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requiring us to build new skills to overcome fear and stretch our potential to the limits."

"We base our experiential training on the model that says learning is deeper and longer lasting when you not only experience it but also have time to

purposefully reflect on what you've learned," Ivy says. "This creates changes in how people feel, think and behave. We coach each participant and review the results of a leadership assessment completed prior to the workshop. Our goal is to give people the skills to transfer the learning into their personal and professional lives."

The trio behind Saddle Sojourns combines advanced horsemanship skills with many years of work in the business world. Ivy has an MS in organizational development from Pepperdine University's Graziadio School of Business and Management, and has been working as an information technology consultant and entrepreneur for over 20 years. Heidi Helly is a champion endurance rider, coach and trainer who runs Harmony Ranch Arabians with her husband. Terri Egan, Ph.D., is an associate professor of applied behavioral science at Pepperdine University's Graziadio School of Business and Management. She has helped several top companies develop executive management teams and create high performance organizational cultures. She is a lifelong horsewoman and she and her husband raise and train young horses.

In promoting Saddle Sojourns to corporate America, Ivy says excitement is a typical first reaction. "Corporations have

spent millions of dollars on class room training," she says. "They are looking for something out of the box. Or, if they have done something like a ropes course or river rafting, they are looking for something different." The next question often concerns how to include participants who may be afraid of horses. "We use fear," Ivy says, "as a group issue to facilitate team work, communications, and trust. Stretching and reaching beyond one's grasp is exhilarating and satisfying. People carry this forward to their lives and work."

Workshops are generally held at the historic Warner Springs Ranch Resort in San Diego. Programs can be transported to other locations depending on appropriate facilities. Workshops can be tailored to meet the needs of just about any group or individual. Saddle Sojourn's current string of performance quality Arabian and Paint horses can accommodate 12 participants. Enrollment is open to groups and individuals, and to riders with no previous experience to advanced skill. "A group of experienced riders would have a completely different program than a group of people with mixed riding experience," Ivy says.

Saddle Sojourns also offers clinics and workshops for endurance riders. The company can be reached at 760 633 1481, or visit their website: www.saddlesojourns.com.