

perspective

Shepherd Youth Ranch | Franklinton

By Jennifer Wood
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WHEN THE WORLD of a young person is shattered and trust in other people erodes, the peace of a walk in a vast field whispering problems and secret dreams to a horse has powerful results. Horses are level animals, and when they are with us they watch diligently in order to find the bond and form a relationship.

"Sitting still talking in a windowless office does not give the same lasting life lessons. I've seen children who haven't spoken one word in traditional therapy come out and stand in a field with a horse and open up," said Ashley Edmonds Boswell, founder and executive director of Shepherd Youth Ranch.

Boswell knew in her soul standing in a barn in 2004 that horses could heal, so she stepped out on faith.

"There were two children at the barn where I boarded my horse, and I knew I was going to start a program working with animals and children — and I knew those two kids really needed help," Boswell said. "So one afternoon I told them that we had a program."

She tells the story like it is no big deal, but it was her faith, her degree in counseling, and her lifelong experience as a horsewoman that changed the lives of those children and subsequently many others including her own.

Before long, the social worker assigned to the family of her initial charges came to the barn for a visit. "She wanted to talk with me about the changes she'd seen in the kids and she wanted to give me a list of other children for my program," she said.

What was once a mere step out on faith was now a giant leap. Based in Charlotte at the time, Shepherd Youth Ranch flourished serving multiple groups of equine therapy clients. Time passed, and although Boswell was grateful for her place in the Mecklenburg County community she wanted to be closer to her hometown of Raleigh in order to grow her organization long-term.

Once again Boswell looked at the ledge and stepped out in faith. As she says, "The Lord just provided. A friend told a friend, and we got the land for our horses to set up in Franklin County — grateful is an understatement."

Home again, the ranch is able to operate their equine therapy program serving Wake County and 12 surrounding counties. Shepherd Youth Ranch is certified by EAGALA, the leading international non-profit association for professionals who use equine therapy in mental health and human development. Their Trail to Success: Equine Assisted Psychotherapy program works with the N.C. Department of Public Safety and the Juvenile Crime Prevention Council to provide trauma focused therapy in a 24-week program consisting of group and family sessions.

In equine therapy there is no horseback riding. The horses are the counselors and in that role they are on the same level as the client. Horses are social animals.

"A horse is uniquely gifted with the ability to read us and mirror us," said Abby McCabe, director of program and development. McCabe leads the group of counselors, equine specialists, and interns at their prep meeting prior to their client's arrival and explain the horse and human dynamic. "These young women have the solutions — we all know what we have to work on — the journey and the work to get there is just painful."

Program manager Alison Clayborn chimed in emphatically, "Sessions 11 through 14 are the hardest because that's when they are really getting deep into what they are working on — they know change is coming."

As program manager, it is Clayborn's job to welcome the young women when they arrive and speak to their parent or guardian about how things are going before the session gets started. After those rounds are complete it is time to huddle up.

"What are the three things we have to remember?" Clayborn asked the group. One very eager young woman waves her arm and pipes up.

"I know: never stand directly over a horse head in case they rear up and bump you, watch where your feet are and where the horse hooves are so they don't step on your feet, and be aware of the electric fence," she said. All solid farm advice.

Clayborn reminds the group that everything said here is confidential, and the only time they would have to share any information would be if someone says they are planning to hurt themselves, hurt someone else, or if they share that someone has hurt them. The summer afternoon, the blue sky, the green pasture, and the soft neighs in the distance are not enough to make you forget these young women are here to heal from trauma.

Today that curative process takes the form of painting. Everyone is handed a harness and led to head out to the pasture to pick a horse.

The girls return to the ring in varied states of eagerness to find grooming tools, cups of vegetable dye, and a poster hanging from the fence with a key of



Left, a participant paints a handprint on Abraham during an equine therapy session at Shepherd Youth Ranch. Right, Abby McCabe, programming and development director for Shepherd Youth Ranch, talks about symbols a participant painted on Suke during an equine therapy session



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symbols illustrating the war paint Cherokee Indians traditionally used before going into battle along with the meaning behind those drawings.

"In life people have goals, and today you are going to paint some of your goals on your horse," McCabe instructs the girls. "Think about something or someone you want to be or do and draw it on your horse. There's no wrong answer."

The counselor's words are carefully crafted. The "no wrong answer" mantra is one they repeat to the young women as a way to encourage them to come to their own conclusions, to dig deep, and work on their "stuff."

For some, a frenzy to brush down their horse and select just the right color paint begins, while others hang back timid and unsure. After a few minutes, the weight of the afternoon falls away and the group seems to forget the adults are present. The girls and the horses are all that remain. The girls know the horses are not judging them outside of reacting to their behavior. Many of the horses awaiting flies in the fading light as blank canvases awaiting life-goal war paint are rescues with back stories and struggles of their own. Prior to getting in this ring each horse goes through extensive training, and when you watch

them interact with the young women it seems these hooved counselors are singularly designed to be in this space at this time.

One young woman is intent on painting her horse's face. Squirming, he is not having it at first, but eventually he gives in and stands still. The counselors raise their clipboards in the background — there's a fervent discussion and scribbling of notes that make it apparent the decorating of this particular horse's face is a big deal. The counselors continue observing each client, some painting epic poems of their lives across the bare backs, others a simple sunley face.

Eventually it is time for each to share the meaning behind this artistic expression with their peers. Willingness to share ebbs and flows throughout the circle until we reach Ferro with his painted face.

Ferro who stood stock-still so he could be adorned with paint by a young woman in a riding ring on a hot summer afternoon. After Ferro's artist shares her life goal design, McCabe shares Ferro's story.

"Do you know why it's such a big deal that he let you paint his face?" asks McCabe, only to be met with silence. "Well, we don't know all of his story, but see here," as she points to a dent on his nose. "This dent is the size of a 2x4, and we think before coming to us he either ran into a 2x4, or he was hit with one on purpose." Still there is more silence. "So you see, it is a big deal that he trusted you enough to stand still for you to paint his face." In that moment, the wave of recognition of trusting again and what that means washes over the group, and the silence is enough.

It is no small thing to step out on faith to help others. Shepherd Youth Ranch has partnered with horses to do so, and that is a remarkable contract of belief in action. Horses are strong, majestic animals capable of carrying our baggage and helping us mend.

They — along with a team of amazing women — are doing so in Franklin County.

A Shepherd Youth Ranch participant muzzles with Ferro during an equine therapy session on Tuesday, June 21. Shepherd Youth Ranch is a faith-based equine therapy nonprofit near Wake Forest. The non-profit serves children suffering from abuse, neglect, grief or loss, along with children who have autism.



Shepherd Youth Ranch intern Elizabeth Casada walks with Jacob and a participant during an equine therapy session.