

Horse Sense: Horses help kids to heal, grow

By Jeff Barnet / Sun-News reporter

Posted: 05/12/2010 01:00:00 AM MDT

Las Cruces— The little boy, maybe 8 or 9, stood in the grassy arena. The horse walked over to him and gently put his head on the boy's chest, right on his heart.

Soon, the boy had his arms wrapped the horse's head and was weeping.

When the boy could talk, he told Ann Remick-Barlow, the licensed social worker who started Helping Kids Be Kids Foundation, that his best friend had died the day before.

This is just one of many stories Remick-Barlow relates when she talks about the ability of horses to heal wounds and teach skills - to children and their families.

"I knew horses would be great teachers for children because they always have been for me," said Remick-Barlow, 67, who has worked as a social worker since 1975 and started the Helping Kids Be Kids Foundation in 2004.

The nonprofit program, based at Remick-Barlow's Spirit Ranch off North Valley Drive, brings horses and children and families together. In the process, kids and family deal with such issues as grief and loss, trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, addictions, depression, anxiety, learning disorders and more.

"What happens between you and a horse is really up to you," she said.

The kind of work Remick-Barlow, her therapists and horse specialists do goes by several names: equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP) when it deals with emotional issues, or equine-assisted learning (EAL) when it deals with learning and communication skills. However, for Remick-Barlow, the less words and labels, the better.

The most powerful moments of teaching and healing that happen between horses and children are nonverbal, she said. The children and families are well aware that they are involved in therapy, she said. But the process is more experiential than it is verbal. The kids call it "horse camp," she said.

"Kids get what they need by showing us what they need, instead of us telling them what they need," she said.

Horses truly are the teachers in this process, she said. She emphasizes that EAP and EAL are not riding or horsemanship programs. In fact, no prior experience with horses is necessary to participate in the program. Children and families interact with the horses as equals, on ground level, doing such activities as grooming, moving the horse, and communicating with the horse. Horses are natural herd animals and teach children how to interact with the herd in a successful, respectful way, she said.

The horses are often survivors of trauma themselves. Rescued from situations in which they were at risk of injury, even death, the six horses who make up the Spirit Ranch team are deeply intuitive about the emotional wounds of others, Remick-Barlow said.

Four of the six horses are miniature horses that stand about two-and-a-half to three-feet high. Imagine the impact when a small child establishes a relationship with a horse his or her own size, she said.

Recalling another story, Remick-Barlow said she once observed a little girl "who couldn't settle down" running over to a miniature horse. The horse began running in circles and didn't stop for more than 10 minutes. The little girl watched with her mouth open, Remick-Barlow said.

Then the girl said, "The horse is just like me."

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Remick-Barlow then asked the girl, "What can you do?"

The girl responded, "I think I can go in there and help him."

Calm and focused, the girl walked up to the horse, who stood still. The two then started walking slowly together around the pen.

"Unfortunately, a lot of times our parents have not seen their child succeed at something," she said. "When they see the child succeed with a horse, it shifts everything. Now they are seeing strengths."

As part of a grant, Spirit Ranch is involved in a research project headed by Dr. Pamela Schultz, director of nursing at New Mexico State University. The research team has published findings showed increased and swift behavioral effectiveness among at-risk youth ages 4 to 16 who have participated in an average of 19 sessions of horse-assisted learning and therapy.

The core element of the therapy is the relationship between the child and the horse. The bond itself is healing, she said. And relationship-building is at the core of strengthening families, also.

"We focus on how families and children impact each other and impact the environment they create just by being the way they are," she said. "A lot of people need to learn a new way of being with each other."

Remick-Barlow said Helping Kids Be Kids Foundation is at a point where it needs to grow. For this task, she has teamed up with Lia Wiss, 59, who has extensive experience with program development and event planning. They said they would like to bring on more therapists and provide opportunities for more people to learn from the horses, through scholarships or other forms of outreach.

Wiss said she knows of children who have survived cancer but still suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder.

"We would love for these children to do this," she said.

She also has seen autistic children transformed through working with horses.

Remick-Barlow said she would like to extend the program to include veterans, and perhaps caregivers, especially women who are stressed by serving in multiple roles.

Toward this goal, Wiss and Remick-Barlow are holding the first-ever fundraiser for the foundation Sunday, "A Celebration of the Horse: A Day At Spirit Ranch."

The event will begin at noon and will feature all kinds of horses - including the herd at Spirit Ranch.

"Horses will show you how to be part of a herd," Remick-Barlow said. "We have a family here, a mother and her two daughters. They have been through a lot."

At length, Remick-Barlow recalls the trauma in the family, problems with violence, drugs, other troubles.

"You should see that family. They have a lot of respect for each other."

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