

Heart of Horse Sense helps WNC kids, veterans

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MARSHALL- It wasn't a strong mentor, a parent, or even a human that brought Shannon Knapp back from a rocky adolescence.

Her therapist wore a saddle, and she's spent her life connecting others with that source of comfort.

"I say I work with at-risk youth, which is strange because I was one," Knapp said, "I grew up around horses and loved them for my whole childhood, but around junior high I got out of horses and started screwing up, getting in trouble."

Her vice? "Sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll," she says with a smile. "The usual. But horses are the original nonjudgmental creature. They don't care what color your skin is or where you come from."

Knapp has worked in equine therapy with horses and humans for more than 30 years, primarily as a consultant for other equine therapy programs around the country.

For 12 years, Knapp has run the for-profit Horse Sense of the Carolinas, one of the leading practices for Equine Assisted Psychotherapy and Learning.

But after years of providing more and more free and at-cost services, she decided to form a nonprofit to bring the services to those who need it most.

This year Knapp started Heart of Horse Sense, the nonprofit wing of the business, to provide free equine-assisted therapy to help at-risk youth and veterans.

The program has been conducting summer equine therapy for at-risk kids throughout the summer. The sessions, which serve 12 children at a time, are a collaborative effort with Children First/Communities In Schools, headed by Barbara Norton at Children First.

During the sessions the kids, most of whom suffer from developmental trauma ranging from poverty and neglect to more acute trauma, get to groom horses, pick feet, water and feed the horses, and for those who want to ride.

The sessions are much more than just riding lessons, though. Some kids never get on a horse, but they celebrate their own victories, whatever they are. Sometimes that's just putting on a helmet and stepping up to the horse, or even walking up the steps and placing hands on its back.

"It's about meeting everybody exactly where they are, and celebrating progress whatever that looks like," Knapp said. "One girl last week swore she'd never get on one, but she made it up the little steps and pet him. We said 'Shout it out, girlfriend, you did it.' That's a victory."

True therapy

The participants who do ride practice balance and belly breathing techniques to calm themselves when they're nervous or anxious. They also work on art projects, petting and learning about other small animals and working with trained therapists on-site.

Horses mirror what is hidden, Knapp said. So a client working with horses receives immediate feedback on their own physical and more subtle, emotional behaviors, and it can help them connect emotional anxieties and response to physical ones.

"Addressing that physiological response is so important," Knapp said. "When a vet dives under the table because a car backfires or a kid jumps out of his skin when a hand moves too fast, that's a different region of the brain than a purely psychological one."

Memories are stored on one side of the brain, but not necessarily processed by the other, making it difficult to undo the effects of traumatic memories and the instincts that follow. The left-right pattern of a horse's movement or "bilateral stimulation" can

help re-program the brain, Knapp said.

Knapp said equine therapy has grown in popularity in recent years, but often with practitioners who have more good intentions than actual qualifications.

"There's a lot of misinformation about what constitutes equine therapy," Knapp said. "Having a horse and wanting to help people is not equine therapy. It may be therapeutic, because horses in themselves can be, but if a mental health professional isn't present, it's not therapy.

"That distinction is important, especially for someone who needs real help," she said. "One is also covered by insurance, and some aren't."

All the horses are rescued or rehabilitated, and many come from the nearby Hope for Horses rescue nonprofit.

Lucky, one of the organization's 28 horses, was found on a trail with eight other horses, all of whom had starved to death. He was the only survivor.

"They all have a story," Knapp said. "A lot like our clients. And they all need a lot of love."

GET INVOLVED

- Heart of Hone Sense is currently seeking "Angels" to sponsor horses, vets, and at-risk-youth. They are also requesting art for their fall art auction fundraiser.
- It costs about \$100 a day for a veteran to spend a day on the farm, Knapp said, and a little less for children.
- For more information, visit www.heartofhorsesense.org <<http://www.heartofhorsesense.org/>>, call 649-7064 or email heartofhorsesense@gmail.com <<mailto:heartofhorsesense@gmail.com>>).