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Gentle Giants

At Peaceful Acres, rescued horses help humans through equine-assisted psychotherapy

By Josh Potter

Nanci Beyerl's office is a large open-air arena with a dirt floor. She jokes that the place stays heated in the summer and air-conditioned in the winter, and the chill of a November morning slips easily through the building's open doors. This fact doesn't bother one set of Beyerl's clients, who lounge along the far wall in newly built wooden stalls and offer a casual whinny upon her approach, but for the human clients that come her way, the cold is less hospitable.

"When I first moved here there was no running water, the pipes were broken, there was only one spigot, the fences were down and the electrical system was not something you wanted to use," Beyerl says, stroking the nose of a large brown mare named Kelly. However, in the seven years that Beyerl has owned Peaceful Acres Horses, Inc. in Pattersonville, the 156-acre horse farm has undergone a transformation similar to the ones she tries to facilitate in her clients. The affable and loquacious equestrian practices equine-assisted psychotherapy, and on Monday her facility entered a new phase of operation with the official ribbon cutting for the heated, plumbed and human-friendly Wright Family Welcome Center.

Festooned around the farm are signs recognizing the facility's many sponsors, including Stewart's Shops and Price Chopper, and Beyerl is quick to acknowledge that none of what she does would be possible without the support of private donors, like the Carillian Foundation and the Wright Family Foundation, who funded the welcome center. But the story at the heart of Peaceful Acres is that of Beyerl herself, who considers herself as much a beneficiary of the techniques she practices as the primary caregiver.

"Horses are very authentic beings," Beyerl says, speaking in a way that seems to acknowledge Kelly's presence as much as that of her human audience. "Because they're prey animals and not predators like, say, a dog, they can read you very well. When someone walks up to them angered or in a rush, they're going to realize that there might be some danger." Crossing her arms in a standoffish way, she says that humans often create ambiguity and dissonance when they profess something verbally—in this case, a sentiment such as "everything's fine; I'm in a good mood"—that is incongruent with their body language. Just as another person might grow confused by someone communicating in such a way, a horse will lose trust. However, when someone takes the time to engage a horse in a mutually authentic manner, admitting the mood they're in and acting accordingly, a deeply reciprocal relationship is possible—a relationship that constitutes the foundation of equine-assisted psychotherapy.

"To take a 1,200-pound being and have it walk with you, without a lead, because you've taken the time to engage and develop a relationship, most of the participants here say, 'Oh my God, I can't believe that just happened.' So we talk about what they did to make that happen."

Beyerl works collaboratively with local therapists, as well as agencies such as Northeast Parent and Child Society, St. Catherine's Center for Children, Girls, Inc., ARC, and Wildwood. While she hopes to incorporate therapeutic riding techniques directed through physical and occupational therapy to those with developmental disabilities, she currently uses nonriding techniques such as horse care and guided walking to address emotional and behavioral issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder, bipolar disorder, substance abuse, trauma and grief, and psycho-social

stress. “Autism, Aspergers, ADHD, OCD—those are the kinds of things we work really well on, to help build communication, self-esteem, self-reliance, focus. Whether it’s with a kid or an adult, you lower risk factors and build up resilience. We see anxiety completely eradicated, and doctors start reducing medication.”

These are lessons Beyerl first learned on her own. The early part of the decade found her on the brink of a big life transition. After a complicated divorce and the decision to leave a career in project management for a construction company, she decided to buy the farm way atop Rynex Corners Road. “I wasn’t thinking that this facility would turn into a therapeutic center and rescue center for horses,” she says. “Quite frankly, I didn’t think I had the ability to pull out of my own grief and loss.” She intended only to teach some riding lessons with a few horses she was permitted to keep in the divorce, just to make ends meet, but the woman from whom she bought the farm sensed that she would put the place to good use. On the wall of the new welcome center, Beyerl has framed and displayed the letter she received from the prior owner, informing her that she’d decided not to sell to a higher bidder and wishing her well with the place. Beyerl gives the real credit to her horses, though, for helping her pull through this time. “They saved my life,” she says. “They made it so I had to get up, go feed them, water them, had to let them out and take care of them. Physically, emotionally, socially, spiritually—just being on this farm is healthy.”

On her own, Beyerl came to understand the basic dynamics of equine-assisted therapy. “If I was going to be reactive with them, I was not going to be able to catch them and get my job done. If they were fearful of me because my emotions were elevated, I wasn’t going to be able to put the halter on them to get them out of the stall and clean it.” So, when she decided to reenter the world of social work, a field she’d left in the ’80s, and found out about the Equine-Assisted Growth and Learning Association, she thought, “OK, everything I’m seeing and feeling is real.”

As she began training with EAGALA, eventually completing a master’s of Social Work degree at Adelphi University, Beyerl began working on Peaceful Acres’ sister mission of providing sanctuary for mistreated horses. Of the 9.2 million horses in the United States, she says, citing American Humane Society statistics, nearly 100,000 are slaughtered every year. Through sponsorship programs (about \$50 a month for feed), Peaceful Acres is able to buy horses that are otherwise bound for the slaughterhouse. They come to the farm in a variety of ways.

Many of the horses are Premarin foals. Premarin is a chemical containing estrogen, isolated from mares’ urine, which is used in hormone-replacement therapies following procedures such as hysterectomies. Beyerl says the practice can be dangerous for women, leading in some cases to cancer, despite the availability of synthetic alternatives, but the industry has become so entrenched and lucrative that it doesn’t show any sign of slowing down. In order to obtain the chemical, mares are kept pregnant in small stalls that prevent the horse from lying down. Urine collection lines remain attached to the mare so that the collection process is continual. Because the mares must remain pregnant, the industry’s byproduct is a steady supply of unwanted foals that subsequently get sold off into the meat industry. After going through auction, the horses are shipped in double-decker trailers built for cattle to slaughterhouses in Canada. And there is no humane ending, says Beyerl: First they stun the horse with a bolt gun and then slit its neck, allowing the blood to drain out, often before the horse loses consciousness. The meat is then shipped to Europe and Asia.

Beyerl says the first trip she took to the “killer-buyer” horse auction in Unadilla, N.Y., was an experience that changed her life. “I was there with people who were there to bid for meat, where livestock are kept in these dark little barns. Sometimes these guys will outbid families who are just trying to buy a family horse, and I’m looking at all these horses knowing I only have a two-horse trailer, just feeling helpless.” She bought two horses on that first trip, one of which is now 36 years old, and continues to acquire Premarin foals through a group that goes around rescuing horses from killer-buyer auctions.

Each of her horses has a unique story. Summer Girl and Snowy are thoroughbreds that came from the Finger Lakes racetrack. At 3, both are too old to compete, but a decline in the horse market that mirrors the overall economy has made resale of these horses, some from choice bloodlines, very difficult. A recreational horse that, eight years ago, could have fetched \$5,000 now might sell for \$1,200—that is, if a buyer can be found at all. Horse-related activities have declined 30 percent in recent years, but “incentive funds” remain for breeders to continue producing horses, while there are no tax breaks or breed funding for sanctuaries to take the unwanted horses, never mind spay and neuter programs. “There’s so much they could do,” she says, “like give farmers an agricultural incentive to provide documentation that you’ve gelded your horse and are no longer breeding.”

When Beyerl first receives an abused horse, it must go into quarantine before being used for therapy. “They need a great deal of time to physically and emotionally heal before anybody starts pulling on them for any of their energy,” she says. “So, we’re very cautious. What’s good for the horse has to be primary.” But the fact that Peaceful Acres uses abused animals for its therapy programs makes for a conducive therapeutic environment. “Sometimes these kids—80 percent of which are in foster placement or residential treatment—have a history that is, in some ways, similar to the horses.” She says she often won’t tell her clients that a particular horse has been abused, but she might tell them it’s had a life of uncertainty and, like the client, is learning how to trust.

EAGALA has compiled a whole manual of equine-assisted therapeutic techniques, but many involve staged scenarios that help a client solve problems that correspond to issues they may be working through.

“I had a girl who said, ‘I can’t get my work done because I’m texting my boyfriend and want to go see him, but my mom doesn’t like him and I’m grounded, it’s not fair.’” So she devised an analogous scenario. In the arena, Beyerl set out a bale of hay representing the social temptation preventing the girl from getting her work done, and then some cones and hula-hoops to represent goals, such as getting homework done or spending time with family. Using the horse as a stand-in for the girl’s impulses, the objective was for her to lead the horse to the cones despite the temptation of the hay bale. The girl realized quickly that, just as it’s futile to assume that all the boys will suddenly disappear from school, it’s impossible to get all the hay out of the barn, so she had to problem solve, which often means asking for help.

Similar scenarios are constructed for adult clients, she says. “They say, ‘I can’t surpass something that’s happened to me in the past,’ like domestic violence, but we have ways for women to lose the victim mentality, to be empowered enough to know what’s best for them.”

To help build the courage to take on a major life transition, Beyerl might set up a scenario whereby there is a hurdle with hay on one side and it’s the task of the client to get the horse to cross the hurdle away from the comforting bale. It might be through finding a rope or halter (the acquisition of new life skills) or the use of a bit of hay as incentive (akin to the use of savings or a severance check) that the client can move the horse (facilitate that life change). “The trick is figuring out what you need to do with the horse to get there. Is it going to be quick or gradual? That’s when they have the a-ha moments.”

Beyerl says the approach is especially useful in addressing social dynamics. While the clinical setting might not always lend itself to honest conversation in the realm of family therapy, when she gets a family to collaborate on one of these scenarios, “then you see who’s always in the lead, who’s hanging back, who’s being scapegoated and who’s being relied upon to take a parental role when one of the parents isn’t present.” The same dynamics apply to the workplace, and Peaceful Acres also takes on corporate groups for team-building exercises. “It’s wonderful with sales groups,” she says, “because they understand the need to get that sale, but they need to understand what they need to give up to get it.” She recalls one group that rushed to finish a

game called “temptation ally,” where a pony is guided through a series of distractions. By the time they reached the finish line, half of the team remained at the start and their “customer,” the pony, was wide-eyed and nervous. They understood that if this were a real-life scenario, they might have scored the sale, but that customer was never coming back or making any referrals.

It’s Monday evening and Beyerl is back in her office, this time surrounded by a group of friends, family, volunteers and community members who have gathered for the official opening of the Wright Family Welcome Center. She jokes that the clean Peaceful Acres sweatshirt she put on for the occasion is about as dressed-up as she ever gets these days. One by one, she acknowledges the contributions each of those in attendance has made to the place, \$50 dollars here and there, and apologizes for the fact she could talk all night, but that the place simply means so much to the kids who get to come to the farm. Peaceful Acres has zero dropout rate among the kids that receive sponsorship, and the new facility will allow clients, their families and therapists to continue coming to the farm throughout the winter months.

When a man in the audience stops her to return the gratitude, it’s the one time Beyerl appears bashful. After seven years of work, the therapy of the experience, it seems, yielded its own rewards.

“Some people say that the idea of the place sounds new-age,” she says, “but to me, to anybody else who does this, or to any farmer for that matter, this is as old as can be. It’s getting back to basics. It’s slowing down. It’s allowing yourself to hear the quiet. Those are the things that happen on this 156 acres.”

For more information about Nanci Beyerl and Peaceful Acres Horses, Inc., or to sponsor a horse or child, visit peacefulacreshorses.com. For more info on equine-assisted psychotherapy, visit eagala.org.