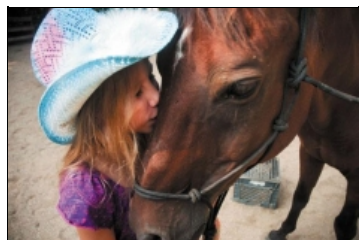


## Girls, horses bond at empowering camp

By Anne Li



**Photo Credits:** Dustin Franz

**Photo Caption:** Sarah Parker gives Raulo a kiss Friday morning during an activity at the Girl Power Camp at The Osage Corral in Albany.

Last week at a corral in Albany, six girls and six horses came together to overcome their shyness, boost self-esteem, and make friends with people and animals they'd never met before.

Girl Power! Camp, which took place at the Osage Corral, uses equine-assisted learning (EAL) to help girls learn to make healthy choices. The local Girl Power!, a national initiative by the Department of Health and Human Services, is run by Athens County Children Services and has programs in Trimble County School District, Federal Hocking Local School District and Hope Drive Apartments.

Girl Power! is a club for girls aged 9-13, that meets once a week year-round. Though the club is similar to Girl Scouts in its goal is to help girls boost their self esteem and improve leadership skills, Girl Power! is more flexible with the type of activities girls can participate in.

"I think (Girl Power!) might be more girl-driven (than Girl Scouts)," said Athens County Children Services school social worker Kerri Shaw. "We really look at what the girls we're working with are interested in and kind of build from there."

Every summer, Girl Power! runs a summer camp geared towards the girls' interests, whether canoeing, rappelling or the arts. This year, Tammy Baumgartel, owner of the Osage Corral in Albany, approached the program to see if the girls would be interested in a week-long horse camp.

"We talked about what kinds of things we wanted to get out of it, and we really felt like the girls could really feel empowered by working with the horses and that it would build self-esteem and leadership skills," Shaw said.

Baumgartel and the other Osage Corral staff are EAGALA (Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association) certified, meaning that they are trained to give therapy and counseling with the aid of horses. According to EAGALA's website, its focus is not horsemanship but rather ground activities that force participants to "apply certain skills," such as confidence or social skills, with horses.

At Girl Power! Camp, the girls don't ride horses but rather engage horses in activities that require the girls to form relationships from the ground up, through various specialized activities including yoga with horses, grooming and leading. Last Thursday, the girls built an obstacle course and had to figure out how to lead a horse through it without using their hands or ropes.

"They had to use communication and teamwork and it's pretty challenging for them," Baumgartel said. "But it's an opportunity for them to problem-solve as a group and make decisions. They had to get together as a group before they built the course and strategize a little bit about how they were going to do it."

After such activities, Shaw helps the girls reflect on theirs and the horses' behavior. According to Baumgartel, this approach to learning is experiential, as opposed to learning empowerment skills from a classroom setting.

"You come out with nature and you practice those skills in the context of that experience," she said.

The girls who attended the camp were from Federal Hocking Schools and Trimble Local Schools and participated in Girl Power! throughout the school year. Each girl's cost for attending the camp was paid for by either Athens County Children Services or Family and Children First Council.

Said Shaw, "(The girls) might've experienced struggles or difficulties; they might've had hard home lives. Girls join for a variety of reasons. Sometimes a teacher will recommend it, as a way to help a girl feel better about being in school. Some girls want to join simply because it's a fun way to hang out with their friends."

Sarabeth Carsey, 12, from Trimble Schools, joined on her teacher's recommendation.

"I first moved here to Trimble from The Plains in the third grade and I liked nobody, and so my third grade teacher told me that there's a Girl Power! group. So I decided to join that because I wanted to meet new people," Carsey said.

Since joining, Carsey believes she's become less shy and has made new friends

"This week we worked with horses that's been shy, and it's helping people that are shy not be shy," she said. "The horses are opening up, so the people are opening up also. Like me, I'm getting over my fear it's helping, and it's been fun."

According to EALAGA's website, a horse's often intimidating size gives people "an opportunity . . . to overcome fears and develop confidence."

Baumgartel said that at the beginning of the week, one girl was scared by the horse she was paired with. Because Girl Power! encourages girls to leave an uncomfortable situation in order to protect themselves, the girl did so. By the end of the week, however, she was once again in the ring, working with the horses.

"The way they act in the ring today (Friday) versus Monday is really more self-assured and confident," Shaw said.

Baumgartel pointed out that not only are the girls benefitting from the camp the horses, several of which are rescue horses from Last Chance Corral, are benefitting as well.

"This gives the horses a new job," she said. "We have a retired police horse. We have a racehorse that wasn't quite suitable for the racetrack and we have rescue horses. So, this gives horses that may be otherwise cast aside an opportunity."

For more information about Osage Corral or to schedule a horse camp, call (740) 590-8514. For more information about Girl Power! call Athens County Children's Services at (740) 592-3061.

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