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## Not your average counselor

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By WILL DRABOLD Special for the Messenger |

ALBANY — Amidst chirping birds and bright sun, local girls received unique therapy from several 1,000-pound counselors.

At the Osage Corral in Albany seven horses helped six girls from Coolville Elementary boost their self-esteem, develop leadership skills and control their anxiety by connecting with and respecting their equine partners.

“They read the horses’ body language and connect with them,” said Tammy Baumgartel, owner of the Osage Corral. “Horses respond very much to the emotion of the person handling them. (It’s) not about making the horses do what we want them to do ... it’s about responding to their cues.”

The girls, all either 11- or 12-years-old, were attending a four-day camp at the corral through the program “Girl Power,” an after school outreach program at several elementary schools in the county funded by Children’s Services.

“Getting to lead and groom the horses is my favorite part,” said Paige Watkins, 12. She added that she learned to approach the horses this week, but said with a smile that she was disappointed she didn’t get to ride them.

Another girl, Brianna Ward, also 12, loved working and being with the horses.

“I thought this was gonna be fun,” Ward said. “How calm the horses are, they’re real friendly and all.”

The Girl Power camp not only featured equine therapy, but each day a local female figure came out to the camp, including State Rep. Debbie Phillips.

“There’s a way for people to learn about their own emotions by being around horses, as well as helping those with physical disabilities,” Phillips said, adding that she hopes these programs will grow.

The corral is putting on another camp in two weeks called “Giddy-Up Whoa!” for kids with ADHD which is already full, Baumgartel said, adding that she had received lots of individual interest in working with the horses.

The camp’s costs may be relatively high, but have been covered by a fundraiser for the corral in the winter and by funding from Children’s Services.

“Last year was the first year (for the camp) and most of the girls and I had never been around the horses,” said Lacey Carsey, the school outreach worker who organizes Girl Power at Coolville Elementary School in the Federal Hocking School District. “The camp is more hands-on (than other forms of therapy) ... the girls get to interact with the horses so they can sense how they’re feeling.”

The girls receive individualized care during the camp and are able to control their anxiety and build self-esteem by becoming comfortable with such a large animal, Carsey said.

“A lot of these kids are from poverty so they don’t get exposure to this,” she said, adding that she would love to extend the program to include other at-risk girls in the county.

The girls were chosen for the camp for various reasons, including having issues at home or with their own self-esteem.

Along with learning to approach the horses, the girls learned to lead and groom them, as well as participating in non-equine activities including a “mindful walk” on the extensive farm located beyond the corral. Girls focused on their visual and then auditory senses, allowing them to be in the moment and deeply relax, Baumgartel said.

“Our energy is something we can be in charge of, that we can control,” Baumgartel said while leading the girls in deep breathing exercises on Thursday. The exercises are used to calm the participants before leading the horses around the large, circular corral.

The property also includes a barn with seven horses, one which is 29-year-old retired police horse Dreamer, another that is a retired racehorse along with three rescue horses.

Baumgartel stressed the horses each have unique personalities and that some are more sensitive than others, affecting how they interact with each girl.

“The horse’s reactions to attitude and emotions are subtle but there,” she said. “The horses mirror their handler.”

During an “energy walk,” the girls had to lead the horses around cones within the corral, which proved more challenging for some than it would sound. It was key for the girls to keep anxiety levels low and self-confidence levels high as they lead two horses, one more challenging than the other.

Bodhi, a brown 5-year-old colt who is a former racehorse, is more sensitive than the others to his leader’s feelings, sometimes leading to a stubborn halt in his trot.

The girls and the corral’s Equine Specialist, Jill Schermacher, then assess the horse’s body language and the surrounding environment to find a way to make the animal feel comfortable and start walking again, an experience Baumgartel calls a “teachable moment.”

“(This is) a different experience than anything else these girls have ever experienced ... it’s a once-in-a-lifetime experience for these girls,” Baumgartel said. “We teach deep respect for the animals then we hope the girls take what they learn here into life.”

The girls learn or develop key life traits, including leadership, the ability to remain calm, self-esteem, self-care, controlling anxiety and other skills in an environment that is safe and one where they will not be judged. For Baumgartel, providing a safe environment for her patients is what drove her to start the corral. A former child and teen counselor at Tri-County Mental Health in Athens, she first saw in 2009 the healing power horses can have on troubled individuals.

“I met a woman who was doing equine therapy and took a client who have been particularly difficult to engage in counseling, an adolescent male,” she said. “We made more progress in one session (using horses) than 12 at the office.”

“Horses are non-judgmental ... this first fellow was used to being judged, but the horse didn’t judge him ... it gave him the ability to practice some skills in a safe environment that he could carry over into other aspects of his life,” Baumgartel said.

After she saw a lasting change in the boy, as well as other patients ranging from 8-17 years of age, she decided to leave Tri-County and opened the corral last summer with another Girl Power group.

“I think its more effective (than traditional counseling) and it provided me an opportunity to bring together all these different parts of my life ... my horses, my farm, my time as a counselor,” said Baumgartel. “I’ve always had this attraction to experiential counseling that involves the natural world because I think there are incredibly healing powers (in it.)”

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