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On Campus News

Healing power of horses Dell explores equine therapy

October 31, 2008



Colleen Dell, Saskatchewan Research Chair in substance abuse

Photo by Mark Ferguson

By Mark Ferguson

The story about a young troubled boy who one day began speaking fascinates Colleen Dell, associate professor of Sociology and the School of Public Health, and Saskatchewan Research Chair in substance abuse. Although the boy had never spoken in his school before, he began talking to a horse after only a few sessions of equine therapy—a method of treatment involving humans and horses.

"These are the kinds of stories you hear," said Dell. "And there are lots of stories out there."

Another story she shares is about a woman who was institutionalized and refused to walk, not because she was physically unable, but because she lacked the will. And after a few sessions of equine therapy, she began


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walking around the stable with the horses.

Dell is hoping to find out how horses might aid her research on aboriginal youth recovering from substance abuse problems.

The treatment is known as equine assisted learning (EAL), a type of equine therapy. Dell and her colleagues have partnered with the White Buffalo Youth Inhalant Treatment Centre and Cartier Stables to begin researching a form of therapy seldom used and hardly seen in scientific literature. But she's hoping to break new ground on the topic.

"I'm looking at the spiritual bond between horses and humans," said Dell. "I think anything that can help aboriginal youth with substance abuse problems needs to be looked at. I don't know how you measure the outcomes and I don't know if you can, but there must be a way to document that. We can look at what's useful and what's not. It's quite a challenge."

Dell intends on measuring the cultural, spiritual and team-building aspects of the program. Since the issue has seldom been looked at from an academic perspective, creating the questions and measurements will be one of the hardest parts.

"The horse can be used to overcome barriers. It offers an alternative space for people," said Dell. "We need biological, psychological, social and spiritual elements—a myriad of things to help you heal. The horse is helping in one way, in addition to the other assistance a person may need."

Dell will begin working with two groups of about 12 aboriginal youth with inhalant abuse problems, one here in Saskatchewan and the other in Ontario. She will monitor the interaction the kids have with horses and how that affects their recovery.

"A horse is like a mirror," she said. "They can tell you so much about a person. The horse will reflect how you're feeling. Horses seem to have an ability to bring someone out of their shell."

The trainers at Cartier Stables use exercises to develop relationships between humans and horses. Most of the exercises don't require riding the horse at all, but simply working with them. For example, one exercise involves two people on opposite ends of the stable with a long rope. The goal is to try and move the horse out of the stable without dropping the rope or breaking a straight line. When Dell tried this, she said it was difficult "until you allowed the horse to show you how to solve the problem."

There is plenty to be learned about the relationship between horses and people, said Dell. With the deep cultural significance of horses for aboriginal people, and the proven success of people overcoming difficult obstacles, she's excited for the prospects of developing this program.

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