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Horses aid path to healing

Equine assisted learning centre helps young women

Peter Wilson, The StarPhoenix
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By constantly monitoring the horse's response, facilitators are able to 'read' the participant when it would be otherwise impossible, MacKinnon adds.

"In turn, strategies used by the facilitator can be modified immediately to suit the participant's responses. Using the horse as a gauge provides a guaranteed successful outcome for both the participant and facilitator."

This awareness helps the process of developing appropriate alternatives in using assertiveness and positive behaviour within the client's own peer groups.

MacKinnon says participants engage in team-emphasized exercises and find themselves learning valuable skills in a fun and exciting atmosphere while working through the dynamics of horses. The exercises are focused to make the participant realize they have the power to make choices -- good or bad. It's about accountability, she says.


Working with a local school division, facilitators at the equine centre operate similarly successful programs with students having behavioural struggles in the classroom.

The program helps positively modify behaviour, which leads to improved attendance/participation in school activities and builds self esteem and confidence in the client, according to MacKinnon.

During sessions, trust and understanding builds between the individual horse and client. What usually follows is steady behavioural improvements as clients learn to interact as a team member, says MacKinnon.

"We see the girls usually bonding well with the horses," White Buffalo's Ernie Sauve says. "Often, initially there is some fear, because some (of the clients) have never been exposed to horses, but bonding usually takes place pretty quickly after those first introductions.

"The equine program offers an opportunity for the girls to relate, to gain empathy, compassion and caring, which we find eventually translates in them

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building better personal relationships with their peers."

In 2007, a partnership was formed between the equine centre, White Buffalo and a research group from the Youth Solvent Addiction Committee, the University of Regina's Faculty of Social Work and the University of Saskatchewan.

Helping co-ordinate the project was Colleen Dell, research chair in substance abuse at the U of S.

"We wanted to understand more about how EAL relates to treatment for volatile solvent abuse among First Nations youth and to document White Buffalo's involvement in EAL so it can be shared with others," Dell says.

Dell was impressed with how well the EAL project overlapped with White Buffalo's existing programming.

"The goals of the programs are similar, and the Cartier program reinforces the teachings the youth are learning at White Buffalo."

The next step for the group takes on a community-based approach, involving all members of the partnership following a research process that identifies the needs of White Buffalo and Cartier. Within the month, the research group is submitting a research proposal to an Alberta funding agency.

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