

Horses Become Motivators for Troubled Youth

"Can I do it? Can I do it?" One hears the insistent voice of an adolescent asking, but not wanting to seem too anxious. It's not cool, you know. "I'll be careful. I know how to do it. I did it last time."

What is it that this young man wants to do? Ride a bike? Play a video game? No. This youth wants to...shovel horse manure from a stable. This young man, a quiet, withdrawn type, would like the opportunity to show his teacher, Liz Harris, Assistant Director of the Therapeutic Riding Program at St. Andrews College in Laurinburg, how well he can perform this task. This remarkable moment underscores what Liz knows to be true: "Horses are a motivator."

So, what are youth with Methodist Home for Children doing at St. Andrews College's Therapeutic Riding Program? Thanks to the research and persistence of Resident Counselor Lisa Oxendine Lesane at our Robeson County Multipurpose Home in Lumberton, youth in this program have been eligible for the past year and a half to participate in this innovative endeavor at the stables of this picturesque college in rural southeastern North Carolina.

Riding and handling horses have been shown to have therapeutic benefits for children and adults with physical, mental, emotional, or learning disabilities, and the youth who come to stay with MHC often have these special needs. Indeed, the cognitive abilities of the youth in our Lumberton Home are well below those of others in the county, in the state, and in our other residential programs. Our youth often have documented learning disabilities. They are also often abused and neglected, emotionally deprived, and so,

can and do benefit from developing a relationship with a horse.

Once a week, youth travel with staff from Lumberton to what Resident Counselor Balen Love calls "a country club setting." Indeed the white fence that surrounds the 300-plus acres signals that one has entered a new world. The tree-lined path up to the stables is reminiscent of "Ann of Green Gables." And, just like all of us, our youth rise to the occasion. "They display their best behavior when they are with the horses. They show me what they are capable of when they are here. Our youth know that this is a treat. We stress to them what a privilege it is to be a part of this program. We are exposing our kids to a part of American culture that they have never experienced," notes Balen.

While Liz is the certified and licensed

instructor, this program is actually a practicum for undergraduates at the college pursuing a degree in Therapeutic Horsemanship. So, like many mentoring programs, it involves older students teaching younger ones. There is a rapport between the young people that is hard not to miss: they speak the same language.

It is also an immensely useful and popular part of the education for youth in our Lumberton Home. "I want to tell you a story about Jaquan," says Liz. "He has been in the program for awhile, and he is one of your 'tougher' kids. He has a rather explosive temper, a short fuse. He wanted to ride his horse alone, and he was ready for the challenge. But, his horse was one of our 'tougher' ones: an older, stubborn but gentle horse who had his own mind about what he wanted to do. It was very frustrating for Jaquan to lead this horse effectively, but he did it. He directed the horse, he did not get frustrated, and he had a good ride. He learned patience, he used his horsemanship skills, he figured out how not to lose his temper. He was very successful with



Liz Harris helps a student take the reigns of a therapeutic riding horse.



A St. Andrews' student in the Therapeutic Riding Program, instructs MHC youth before they ride.

the task at hand. He did it and did it well. He knew it, I knew it. Very satisfying," says Liz matter-of-factly. "Those are the moments when you know your program works, you can—and the students can—see the results immediately."

MHC's Values-Based Model of Care that is used in all residential services stresses the centrality of six values in working with young people and their families: honesty, respect, responsibility, empowerment, compassion, and spirituality. According to Balen, the therapeutic horsemanship program reinforces, in a very concrete way, these often intangible values.

"The program also teaches our kids to trust: trust in the horse, trust in the instructor, and trust in themselves. This program also helps them to learn another valuable lesson: that they can be entrusted with something very important, in this case, the care of a horse. Many of them have never been given this opportunity before. This is such a great program!" Resident Counselor Lisa beams.

This work in the Therapeutic Horsemanship Program is a good example of collaboration between two institutions interested in providing services: St. Andrews students in the program need to learn how to help those with disabilities; MHC serves that very population. St. Andrews is an integral part of the community served by MHC's Lumberton home, and MHC has staff with the presence of mind to find and act on opportunities to engage and educate our youth so that when they return to their home communities, they will be better equipped to handle the stresses of their lives. While they might not have the

opportunity again to ride a horse, they will have learned valuable social skills and communication techniques with these horses that will serve them well with humans.

Therapeutic horsemanship is a well-established tool for helping those with

disabilities. The program at St. Andrews is a member of and accredited by the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association whose motto is apropos to the youth in the program: "Appreciating the power of the horse to change lives." It is not, however, just the horses that help change our youth's lives for the better: It is the students and staff of the Therapeutic Horsemanship Program at the college who have worked hard to help us in our mission to affirm the worth of God's creation. ■

Balen Love (shown below with equine friend) explains how the Therapeutic Horsemanship Program helps to instill MHC's values into the youth we serve:

The kids learn **honesty** when they are with the horses. They have to admit they don't know what do in front of their peers. This is hard for most children, but especially for our youth. They also have to be honest about their fear of horses: these are big animals, and while they are all gentle and specifically trained for this work, they are scary, especially if you have never been around them.

Our kids also learn **respect** in the program: respect for the horse and respect for their teachers, often just a little older than they are, but very skilled in horsemanship.

Responsibility is key too. Our youth learn the responsibility of caring for horses. They don't just ride the animals. Before they leave, they must insure that the horses have what they need until the next day.

This experience with therapeutic horsemanship is also **empowering** for kids. They learn that they can indeed control a large animal.

One of the things I love to see is our big guys who are gruff and rough. I love to see them walking next to a horse, stroking it, talking to it...showing it the **compassion** that all living things deserve. Many of our kids have not been shown this compassion themselves, but these horses are so gentle—just look at their eyes. Our kids learn about compassion for all of God's creation with these animals.

And, there is also a **spiritual dimension** to this work here at St. Andrews. When the kids are on a horse, they are physically bonded to it, but they also develop an emotional bond with the animal as well. I think that these connections allow them to find meaning in their lives—the essence of spirituality.

