

WESTERN HORSEMAN

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EDITOR'S NOTE BY A.J. MANGUM HORSES, GROWTH AND LEARNING

One of Greg Kersten's first jobs out of college was in a District of Columbia lockdown facility for juvenile offenders, where he worked as a residential counselor. The pay wasn't great, so Greg, who grew up rodeoing and working with horses on his family's Nebraska ranch, began training horses on the side.

Working with horses helped Greg deal with the considerable stress of his job. It provided an escape, something that felt far removed from his days spent working with emotionally troubled, even violent, teenagers.

Greg was surprised when his two universes—a youth prison and a horse barn—began to merge. He noticed the young people at the correctional facility taking an interest in overheard descriptions of his evening and weekend horse—training sessions. Greg saw an opportunity.

He made some of the kids an offer: If they improved their behavior in the facility and earned work-release status, they could help him with the horses.

Some of Greg's first volunteers came from inner-city backgrounds and hadn't necessarily seen a horse before. As he brought each of his new helpers into the round pen and explained the horse's movement, Greg noticed some changes in the kids. They became more aware of their own physical presence and the signals sent by their body language and demeanor.

As they continued working with the horses, the teens learned that physical intimidation, outburst and other products of anger—all heavily utilized pieces of their arsenal—were suddenly rendered useless. New approaches had to be learned, emphasizing trust, respect, patience and responsibility.

Back at the lockdown facility, Greg saw a marked improvement in the progress of his team of budding horse trainers. The lessons they learned working with horses began to influence their interactions with people. Constructive behavior again edged out violence and anger.

Greg went on to work in prisons and youth programs in six states, finally winding up on Santaquin, Utah. Along the way, he continued to use horses as tools for emotionally troubled individuals he encountered on the job. In 1999, Greg partnered with Lynn Thomas, a licensed clinical social worker, to found the Equine-Assisted Growth and Learning Association, a Utah-based non-profit devoted to creating standards, and practices for equine-assisted psychotherapy.

EAGALA has since become the leading organization in its field, with more than 2,500 members, including mental-health professionals, horsemen, therapeutic-riding programs and large-scale operations such as the Cal Farley Boys Ranch in the Texas Panhandle. The membership covers wide demographic range, Greg says, with the strongest numbers in California, Colorado and Florida.

The group has three-tiered certification program for therapist and equine professionals, with seminars hosted by local chapters nationwide.

“The training sessions create standards for safety, ethics and practice,” Lynn explains, “The hands-on workshops give professionals the tools they need to effectively bring horses into therapy sessions.”

In equine– assisted psychotherapy, a licensed therapist partners with a professional horseman to create a short-term program aimed at helping a client with mental-health issues. Clients learn about themselves by working with horses-primarily through ground-work-and discussing the behaviour and emotions brought out by the experience. Such efforts have proven effective in improving self-awareness and developing problem-solving skills and other tools. Equine-assisted psychotherapy has a growing following among therapist helping clients with a wide range of mental-health situations, from violent behavior to addiction and eating disorders.

When first exposed to the idea of a horses assisting in the treatment of an emotional disorder, Greg says, some therapists can be very skeptical.

“We used to get more horsemen than therapists involved (in training session),” he says. “Now, a couple of years later, that’s changed. Each session averages 35 people. Over half are mental-health workers, some with horses experience, but a lot without.”

Tim Jobe, who runs the farm and ranch programs at Cal Farley Boys Ranch, a 10,600-acre, long -term placement facility that’s home to 320 boys and girls, is member of the EAGALA board of directors. The Cal Farley program heavily utilizes EAGALA philosophies. The mechanics of equine-assisted psychotherapy, Tim says, aren’t hard to understand.

“We’ll have a group of kids go through a pen with 35 saddle horses,” he explains. “Some kids are reluctant to mingle with the horses. One kid might stand off in the corner until the horses approach him. If he’s doing that in the arena, he might be doing that in his life. Seeing how the horses relate to other kids gives him an idea of why he’s in the corner by himself.”

Problem-solving enters the equation right away, Jobe adds.

“Most of the kids have no idea how to put a halter on a horse and I don’t tell them how. The whole thing is set up to let them find out what their own problems are and figure out ways to handle them. I don’t point out their problems. The horses do.”

EAGALA’s current goals include getting more recognition in the mental health field, and helping clients qualify for automatic insurance reimbursements. The group also pursues grant money for studies on the effectiveness of equine-assisted psychotherapy.

For more information on EAGALA, visit www.eagala.org or call 801-667-2191