

Equine therapy helps teens' lives begin to blossom

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Pat Dubois Clinical Director, A New Day Youth and Family Services

By Nancy Harbert

Shirley (not her real name) sprays a mist of water onto Sweet Jane's stall and then drags a brush through the horse's coarse hair.

"What do you like about Sweet Jane?" asks Pat Dubois, clinical director of A New Day Youth and Family Services and owner of Sweet Jane and a handful of other horses.

"I like her disposition, her personality. She's quiet, we get along," says Shirley. "She reminds me of me."

In about eight visits to Dubois's Corrales home, Shirley has worked with Sweet Jane, grooming and leading her through exercises, all of which are part of Shirley's mandated therapy as a resident of A New Day's shelter for low-income, at-risk teens. For 34 years, A New Day has been providing emergency shelter, counseling services and educational programs to troubled teens across Albuquerque.

Four years ago, Dubois, a nurse and social worker, introduced equine-assisted learning therapy into A New Day's counseling program. "Horses help our clients in learning the power of nonverbal messages, decision making and interdependencies found in life and family systems," said Dubois, who became trained in equine-assisted therapy eight years ago, in a recent Local IQ interview. "This kind of experiential therapy forces the teens to be reflective about themselves and they volunteer information more readily than in a regular therapy session. We can do more in an hour here than in an hour of traditional therapy."

Every Friday, a group of teens arrives at her house and they each choose the horse they want to work with. Joan (not her real name) gravitates to Boo, a sorrel mare. "I like that she's stubborn and won't let people get close."

"Like how you used to be?" Dubois asks. Joan nods.

Paul (not his real name) goes for Sadie, an imposing palomino mare. "She's the biggest one so I know she's the boss and I like her color," he says. "She's also quiet and calm."

Next comes an obstacle course, designed by the teens, who set down tubs of baby carrots, hay and grain. After a couple of attempts, by working together, they successfully lead Cinnamon, named for the color of her coat, through an avenue of PVC pipes and orange cones, not letting her grab a carrot or mouthful of hay. An impromptu evaluation session follows in the corral, during which Dubois and three other New Day therapists ask questions and point out positive ways in which the teens tackled the exercise, relating it to the struggles of life.

"I didn't get the sense that you wanted to give up," says Dubois. "I really appreciate that spirit in all three of you. It will carry you far." She also commented on how, in such a brief exercise, they quickly learned that by trusting each other they were able to lead Cinnamon through the course and away from the gastronomical temptations.

Dubois's horses are all mares and, like the teens, they have all undergone their own trials and tribulations. Sweet Jane's family was killed in an accident and Sadie had been used by drug companies to extract her urine, a controversial practice used to develop the hormone replacement therapy drug Premarin.

After completing the obstacle course exercise, Shirley stands against the corral railing and says that being at Dubois's ranch makes her feel calm, something not often available to a teenager. "The horses make me think differently, I can put a horse in my shoes and double-check before I make a decision," she says.

Dubois remembers that when Shirley first arrived at her home she wouldn't brush Sweet Jane or spray her.

"She was so shut down, she didn't even think she could have any goals," Dubois says. "Now she has learned what she needs to do to help herself. She is open to more things."

She has already set one goal: to become a chef.

"It's so rewarding to see the changes happen as we work, in the moment. It's obvious in their faces and body language," Dubois says. "You're with them as they are developing new tools. I'm honored to see it blossom." {mos_sb_discuss:7}