

Equine Reflections

Not Your Typical Horse Experience

For our continuing coverage series on non-profits, I would like to tell you about Equine Reflections, Inc. It's not what you would expect of horse therapy. Of course, horses are involved, but not for riding; and not just any horse. Only rescue horses are used!

Although Bonny Barry founded Equine Reflections about 6 years ago, it had been her dream for years, since she was a high-school student. Bonny had been sexually abused as a child and silenced. She personally knows the value of being rescued by a horse. That changed her entire philosophy from therapeutic riding to Equine Assisted Learning (EAL), using the horse as the facilitator. The non-profit also offers Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) with a licensed therapist. Bonny is licensed in Equine Assisted Learning and a certified Equine Therapy Specialist. She is the only one in our area offering equine assisted learning in mental health.

"EAL is a unique & powerful learning experience through ground activities with horses and then reflection about the activity through discussion. EAL can be used for personal growth, corporate groups, youth leadership, children in foster care and our 'Say Whoa to Bullying & Giddy Up to Kindness Program.' This method does not require a therapist for sessions.

Story and photos by Donna Bush





Benefits: Inspire growth and change, problem solving, practice focusing on the present, setting boundaries, accomplishing goals, better communication and social skills. You will also learn so much about yourself through the unique, fun program using real horsepower to improve your life."

"Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) consists of a licensed therapist, an equine specialist, and the most important team member, our 4-legged therapist. EAP can be used with a variety of individuals suffering with mental health issues. It is a powerful and effective therapeutic approach that has remarkable impact on youth, individuals, families and groups." Bonny is very clear on the fact that she is not a therapist. Her part in the EAP sessions is as the equine specialist. A certified therapist attends these classes.

"Benefits: Using a horse in an outdoor setting offers a sense of peace and is a much different experience than talk therapy. It allows clients an opportunity to use all senses while learning and processing challenges; building social skills that are needed to enhance the client's life, increase self-esteem and self-respect, emotional regulation and responsibility to mention a few."

Both EAL and EAP are appropriate for children or adults, families and groups.

"I found a friend with 4 legs that I can tell all my secrets to."

From a young patient at Equine Reflections

Why horses? "Horses have natural abilities and traits that make them excellent teachers and therapists. Their heightened senses allow them to mirror feelings and behaviors in a non-judgmental way. As prey animals, horses maintain an acute awareness of their immediate surroundings. This

innate vigilance allows them to perceive emotional states accurately in the present moment.

Horses are truthful; they never lie."

Unlike a lot of us humans, horses always live in the present moment. A prey animal would not survive if they dwelled in the past or the future.

All of the horses and donkeys residing at the farm are rescues. They have all been abused in some way – either through neglect or trauma, or both. Chance, a beautiful, tall palomino that reminded me of Roy Rogers' horse, Trigger, was beaten in the face with a chain; ear-twitched and lip-twitched with a chain; and gelded without anesthesia. He is truly the most gentle giant I have ever met. Nicknamed the "Barbie doll dream-horse," it took

about a year of allowing him to trust and know that he was loved before he would come to Bonny. He had been working with a volunteer twice a week, when a cancer patient visited and requested to touch Chance. Reluctant because she wasn't sure Chance was ready, Bonny explained his background of abuse to the cancer patient and that it would have to be on Chance's terms if he would even let the patient near him. But Chance knew who he was meeting. The big, powerful, mistreated horse lowered

his head and willingly, lovingly allowed his head and neck to be rubbed by the cancer patient!

"Each horse has completed a rehabilitation process and





passed a training protocol. The gift of regained trust is a valuable component of the equine-assisted growth and learning therapeutic model because it is what inspires the horse-human connection. This connection is the pathway by which the healing power of the horse works upon the heart and the mind. Rescue horses are good at revealing what is unspoken (the good and the bad) in regard to how we relate to and interact with others.”

Bonny’s first and primary focus is the safety of the horses and people in the arena. This is instilled in every student from day one. Each student, regardless of age or experience, is tested on their ability to behave safely for their sake, the horse’s sake and anyone else in the arena. Before a student is allowed to tack a horse on their own or walk into the pasture, they must demonstrate their knowledge of the safety protocols.

I was fortunate to attend one of Bonny’s group EAL classes with 12-year old Lily and 8-year old Emerson. Lily has been with Equine Reflections for 1-1/2 years and Emerson for 6 months.

Lily came to Darlene and Mike as a foster at 3 months old, weighing only 3 pounds. She had some developmental issues – unable to make eye contact, talk, etc. Darlene and Mike helped her catch up to her age group, sharing “all it took was love.” Speaking of love, they didn’t plan to get attached but they did and began the adoption process to bring Lily into their family. She officially joined their family at 2-1/2 years old. From a small child, she always loved all animals – rabbits, chickens, ducks, etc; and begged to ride horses. There were ponies at her third birthday party. But, the clencher was attending a Destrehan fair that offered horse rides. The beaming smile on her face was enough to prompt them to find a place for Lily to interact with horses. A conversation with Bonny convinced them they had found the perfect match. Darlene shared, “We love the safety factor.” Lily attends once a week for the 90-minute group lesson but is typically at the farm for 2 hours or longer. “Lily was a little bud

“My daughter was silenced by bullies until Danny Boy helped her find her voice.”

From a parent of a patient at Equine Reflections

and now she is blooming. Working with Bonny has been so good for her, especially with building her confidence. She’s not shy anymore. She opens up, interacts with her older siblings, smiles and makes eye contact. This has been absolutely lifechanging!”

In addition to all that, she has gained a wealth of knowledge about horses. Knowing that she is homeschooled, Bonny has invited her to participate when senior groups have attended and to attend equestrian dental visits. Lily wowed the seniors with her equine knowledge and attentively watched the dentist’s every move, asking questions and taking it all in. She’s become the spokesperson for the Stop Bullying program and made a commercial promoting it. Her goal is to perform dressage and hunter/jumper.

Emerson’s mom, Mandy, first approached Bonny for riding lessons. Along the way, she mentioned Emerson’s anxiety issues and learned that Bonny was licensed in EAL. Bonny



began implementing her training to address the anxiety by introducing relaxation techniques to help her comfort level on and around the horse. When the anxiety got worse, Mandy reached out to Bonny for advice and a recommendation for a mental health professional. Despite the long waiting list for EAP, Bonny said bring her to the class and she would fit her in.

Mandy shared, "Bonny loves what she does. You can tell her heart is in it 100%! She has such a calming demeanor that instantly puts you at ease. Both Emerson and I were nervous that first visit. But, within five minutes with Bonny, I could see Emerson's shoulders drop and her relax. Everything Bonny does relates back to real life. The relaxation techniques she teaches for riding carried over to home and life in general." Emerson attends riding lessons once a week and either EAL or EAP once a week.

Bonny shared, "Horses are very observant; and sensitive to movement and emotion. Often, they mirror a client's behavior or emotions, conveying an understanding and connection that allows the client to feel safe. This promotes a sense of self-awareness, using the horse's behavior and interactions for feedback

"I watched as the children bonded with these horses over shared experiences of harm. Each child seemed strengthened and comforted by the horse. It was a beautiful gift to observe."

Crossroads Nola employee
after foster children's visit

and an opportunity to check in and process what is happening in the moment." For new students, Bonny invites them out to see the horses, get comfortable and see what happens. Often, she will ask, "Which horse is most like you? Which horse is least like you? Why? What do they remind you of that is pleasant? Unpleasant? That's when the stories come up." The psychotherapist says she can get more out of 1-2 equine therapy sessions than 6 months of talk therapy in her office!

The lessons were basic but amazingly powerful. Once safety measures

have been established, students tacked their horse and brought them to the arena, keeping a safe distance from each other. "Today's lesson is about RESPECT. What does respect mean to the horse? What does respect mean to you?" Then they meticulously groomed their horses, demonstrating respect. Once grooming is complete, Bonny instructed the students to tell their horse "Whoa," work together as a team, and choose 8 items within the arena to build an obstacle course that they will lead their horse through. The horses begin to play with each other. Bonny reminded the girls, "Always be aware of where the horses are. Safety first!"

The process is known as experiential learning where students "learn by doing" and then reflecting on the process. Bonny recognizes what the horse is doing and helps implement the message into the student's life. Learning by doing instills the lesson deeper than just telling someone how to perform a skill. Traditional learning retention is about 5%, where experiential learning retention can be up to 90%.

To delve a bit deeper into the horse/student connection, let's talk about heart coherence. It is statistically proven that the horse can feel the

Clyde the Never Give Up Horse



Clyde was a Clydesdale from Saskatchewan Canada, but not the typical bay color. He was black. The farmer who owned him kept his mother as a PMU mare, bred to produce pregnant mare urine that was used in hormone replacement products for menopausal women. The foals were just a necessary by-product to keep the mares pregnant. They were sold as soon as they were weaned. Demand for the products declined significantly and the farmer sent all of the horses to be sold. No one wanted Clyde since he wasn't the usual bay color. Well, no one except Bonny. She saw him on the adoption site 2 days

before he would be sold at auction. After arranging transportation, Clyde arrived in Folsom scared of everything, having never been handled or hardly fed. He soon became Bonny's faithful companion, and everyone fell in love with him. He was smart and quickly learned tricks; loving to perform; giving kisses to sick children and soon he became known as "Clyde, The Never Give Up Horse." There's even a book about him written by local author Deborah Young. Sadly, Clyde passed away recently, but his legacy will live on through the hearts of all those he touched and encouraged.

How can you Help Equine Reflections?

They need funding! Donate!

Book a corporate class.
Book a Kentucky Derby Day party. Book senior graduation photos with a horse.

They currently have an active advisory board and seek interested people to serve on their board of directors, participating in weekly meetings, fundraisers etc.

If interested, please send a resume to Bonny at:

EquineReflectionsInc@gmail.com

Call Bonny at **985-373-7788** if you are interested in volunteering with the horses. Training is required.

To donate, visit their website

EquineReflections.org

or click the QR Code below



student's heart rate and understand what is going on internally with the student. Bonny described one EAP student who selected a donkey to work with. The student had an extremely negative attitude. Each time she would say something inappropriate, the donkey would push her with its nose, repeatedly. Her task was to take items in the arena and build a house into which she could lead the donkey. She actually had the donkey in the house until she described it as a "house of negativity." With that description, the donkey left the house and refused to go back in. Bonny explained to her that she would have to change what was inside of her before the donkey would obey her. She could walk around the arena and the donkey would walk with her but not enter the house. Finally, she walked around the arena thinking positive thoughts and the donkey walked straight into the house.

Bonny told me of a young client who observed two horses interacting together with one horse biting the other one on its rear end. When asked what was happening, the child said, "That horse is kissing the other one on the hiney like step-daddy does to me." Other students have said, "They are fighting like my brother and my dad, fighting non-stop."

"We never know what the horses are going to do, but yet they seem to know what to do to help the children open up and share."

A student who had nearly drowned chose Dreamer as her horse. At the time, Bonny was not aware of the incident. The obstacle course was a blue tarp held down by orange cones that represented

"I didn't want to live anymore, until Spirit changed my life."

From a young patient at Equine Reflections

a raging river. The student shared "I'm afraid of water. I almost drowned." In her mind, the metaphor of the blue tarp representing a raging river was real.

Dreamer picked up on her fear, grabbed the orange cones, shook them and threw them. Then he stomped and pawed at the raging river until it was smaller. Her fears were allayed, and she walked across giggling.

The girls worked well together, discussing which items to use and how to layout their course. They even created course rules. Bonny instructed them to perform a grounding exercise by shaking their bodies, shoulders and twisting their feet back and forth in the dirt to get grounded; thereby shaking off any anxious energy.

Several pieces of PVC pipe were used in building the course. This presented a challenge for Emerson to lead Gumbo through the course,



as he had been beaten with similar pipe. It took several attempts, as Bonny coached Emerson. "What can you do to earn his trust? Think outside the box. Be creative!" Ultimately, they were successful. Life lesson: Once you help your horse face its fears, you learn that you can face your own fears.

Emerson's comments from the Respect Lesson: "The horses have helped me learn to respect their power and to be aware of their body language. If I respect the horse, they will respect me. Just like if I respect my friends, they will respect me."

Lily had an easier course with Danny Boy.

Lily's comments on the Respect Lesson: "Respecting my horse's feelings is how the horse taught me to respect others. They show me signs of what they like and what they don't like. And when I treat my horse with respect my horse will respect me the same way by obeying what I tell them with signs. But if they feel like I'm not respecting them correctly they will correct me by standing in front of me and not obeying my signs."

The "Say Whoa to Bullying and Giddy-up to Kindness" program will start in September when school is back in session. School age children as young as 2nd and 3rd grades attend these programs, but they are available for all ages. The messages are changed to target the age groups attending. October is Bully Awareness month. They want the 3 B's to attend – Bully, Bullied and Bystander. Their program targets prevention of bullying. Participants are asked to take the "stop bullying" pledge and to sign a contract that they will not be bullied; and that they know what to do. If a child has been bullied and silenced, their parents are given the choice of their child attending either EAL or EAP sessions. A 2021 report in WalletHub ranked Louisiana as having the sixth largest bullying problem in the country.

When I asked how the message is presented to the bully, Bonny said, "Through the horse. There's nothing like a 1000-pound plus teacher to get a point across! How they treat the horse is how they treat people. As prey animals, horses are very sensitive to the emotions and mannerisms of the bully." Participants must adjust their own feelings, mannerisms, and emotions to successfully work with the horse. When the bullied work with the horse, their anxiety lowers and their self-esteem increases.

When we think of horsepower, most people immediately think of the power of a muscle car's engine. How fast can it go from zero to 60? Real horsepower is the power of these 4-legged therapists that give us examples of how to rebuild your life after abuse and neglect; how to overcome adversity or negativity in your life; and how to be a shining star in the sky.