

Where the Spirit Has



Story and Photographs by Meg McKinney

The riders and horses at the Spirit of Hope Youth Ranch move forward, one step at a time, but need care and patience before they do. The calm, quiet horses show their muscle by carrying their riders and their baggage.

The baggage is packed with histories of abuse, loss of traditional family relationships, getting tossed from foster home to foster home, life in residential facilities and social problems.

The horses of many colors—chestnut brown, golden palomino, jet black, pale grey—who calmly bear their riders' baggage have saddlebags of their own, including former abusive owners, starvation, neglect, illnesses.

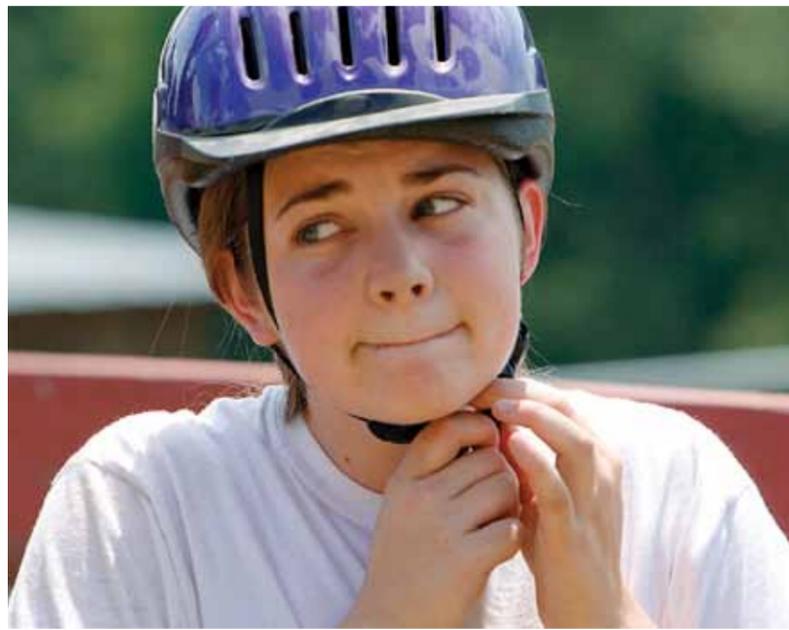
The horses found their way to the ranch with the red barn, green pastures and loving owners through adoptions from local rescue agencies and donations from individuals who knew the horses needed new homes.

For the riders and participants at Spirit of Hope, just spending a few hours there, if

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— Joy O’Neal.





not several sessions, is a reward, typically, for good behavior.

It's an honor and a privilege to get to groom the horses—Aslan, Cisco, Job, Leo, Savoy, Shadow, Zeke—and to saddle up and ride in the large exercise arena.

If a kid is unable to visit more than once a quarter, then, he or she learns to walk beside the horse with a lead line. Missy Cox, program director, and Lindsey Silver, barn manager, make sure the kids have a play time with the horses, involving obstacle courses, games and relay races.

Adorned in pink-satin Easter bunny ears, Cox organized egg races for riders and walkers, where the low-lying obstacles, traffic cones and hay bales had names reflecting real-life: "learning to navigate the path of life" (a crooked walkway, narrow in parts), temptations (hay for the horses, so the horse would want to stop walking and eat), and "things you got to get over" (wooden rails to step over).

In another event, riders must carry an egg in a spoon in each hand, as a volunteer leads the horse. If they drop an egg, they have to start their relay over.

At the completion of the relays, the kids are allowed to keep the chocolate-candy contents of the plastic eggs.

One boy asks, "Do we win money?" The answer is a flat no.

"It's a place where kids get to be kids,"

Joy O'Neal, director and a volunteer, says with a smile. For example, after going for a ride, feeding the horses and returning them to their pastures, two of the boys check out a watery hole in the ground next to the water trough where a large frog resides.

"Not in your pocket," a volunteer tells one of the boys, who has his hands behind his back and is trying to do just that—put the frog in his pocket. The boys sure want to take the frog home with them.

Spirit of Hope Youth Ranch is also "a place for quiet, for redemption, a place to turn all the bad stuff into something good," O'Neal says.

The kids have to learn to communicate with an animal that is larger than they are and doesn't speak. The learned skills can be applied to their lives.

For the shy or withdrawn, this means learning to speak to a horse with confidence—"walk," "forward," "whoa."

Terrified kids facing court appearances learn "to use their horse voices when they testify."

The overly outgoing learn "to talk to horses the way you'd like to be talked to," O'Neal adds. "This teaches empathy and consideration. Skills they should have learned at home."

The program wouldn't be a success without the volunteers, both men and women. "The volunteers are the heart of the agency,"

O'Neal says proudly. "We have the best volunteers in the world."

Volunteer Larry Siegal is asked why he wants to help out at the ranch. "I like to watch the magic between the horse and the kid, and I felt it was time to give back," he says.

After an orientation and basic training for working with horses, volunteers are given a complete guidebook to follow. Then they are assigned to a horse that is assigned to a kid. No youth is alone with a horse when grooming or riding, and no adult is alone with a youth. Each session is a group event.

Jim Morrison volunteers despite being allergic to horse hair. What keeps him coming back? "Seeing kids that are troubled, at their best behavior. There is no in-fighting."

Horses and volunteers take road trips around the Birmingham area to residential facilities for troubled youth. As a reward

From top left: After a lesson, beginning riders take a short trail ride as volunteers lead the horses. One horse's long, white tail is braided into a new style. Opposite, clockwise: The winner of the egg-and-spoon obstacle race is thrilled. All riders wear helmets. The traditional red barn is a welcoming home for horses. A boy is ready to ride; after the class, he and a volunteer brush Glory. The newly braided tail sways gently as a youth leads the horse in an obstacle race. There is time at the ranch for the kids to get to know the horses.





for good behavior, the youth get to pet and groom a horse.

"Everybody knows there's a biting end and a kicking end of a horse," Cox announces to the kids on a spring morning at a facility. "Today we're going to learn about grooming a horse."

She shows them the tools of the trade—brushes, curry combs, and hoof picks—and demonstrated safety habits: keeping hands flat when around the nose and mouth, patting the hips of the horse when walking around the back end, and avoiding sudden movements.

"Horses are flight animals," Cox says. When alarmed, they move very fast as a defensive measure, she tells the group.

The equine duo looks their finest after two 50-minute grooming sessions. To the delight of Cox, Silver and the volunteers, the youth brushed and curried away mud and old winter coats.

Team work and sharing come into play. One girl, a whiz at braiding hair, begins braiding a soft white mane.

Another says, "I'd like to try," and the first girl shows her how to braid hair. Working as a group, the teens also braid one tail



three ways, a new look for any horse.

Those few moments with a calm, patient horse provide more than just an opportunity to braid a horse's mane and tail.

The ranch volunteers have noticed that boys and girls don't relate to the horses in the same way.

The teenage boys are more affectionate and more physically open with the horses than the teenage girls, one volunteer says. The observation being that boys don't mind mud and dirt, while the girls are more concerned about keeping up their appearances and, for a while, are more reserved around the horses.

Speaking of appearances, this spring the ranch introduced a program where the female participants are called Barn Belles and Barn-utantes (a play on debutantes). The Barn Belles will represent the ranch at events, and the Barn-utantes help organize events at the ranch.

The Barn Belles and Barn-utantes were given a complimentary Day of Beauty with new hair styles at Studio 2412; make-overs with stylists Melissa Achuff and Heatherly Marlow; a professional photography session with Ambre Amari; an etiquette talk from

Katie Layton; and inspirational discussions with Michele Oliver about overcoming loss, and Shannon Lindsay, publisher of southernbeautymag.com, about making a difference in the world.

"It's hard to be a Hepburn (Audrey), in a Hilton (Paris) world," Lindsay tells her newly made-over audience. For poise, one should "walk with knowledge, and for lips, you should speak only words of kindness."

By the end of the day, each of the eight girls has a new look, more confidence and fashion-model photographs to remember her day.

On the following Saturday, the young ladies put their new manners to work at the ranch's annual fund-raising event, Bluegrass & Burgers. Over 350 attend this year, enjoying burgers grilled in the sunshine, horsemanship demonstrations, a dancing guest horse performance and live bluegrass music by The Tack Room Boys.

The annual numbers of youth who visit the ranch indicate success: 150 children visited the ranch the first year, 2008; 236 in 2009; 341 in 2010; and over 400 are expected in 2011.

The Spirit of Hope Youth Ranch is a non-profit that was inspired by a book, *Hope Rising*, by Kim Meeder, who with her husband, Troy, operates the Crystal Peaks Youth Ranch in Bend, Ore. The Meeder's attended the opening of the Spirit of Hope in 2008, and Troy visited again this spring, giving a program about horses and troubled youth. For more information, please visit www.sohyr.org.

Top left: Joy O'Neal, director; one boy tightens the saddle's girth as a volunteer assists. Opposite, top left clockwise: A Day of Beauty for the Barn-utantes and Barn Belles offers make-up lessons and professional photography sessions with Ambre Amari. Hamburgers sizzle at the annual Bluegrass & Burgers fund-raising event; a bouquet tied to a gate welcomes all. Following a lesson, the horses are returned to green pastures. A volunteer tosses a ball to keep teens involved during a morning visit to a facility. A Barn Belle fastens an admission bracelet. The first class of Barn-utantes are presented at Bluegrass & Burgers.

