

AT THE THRESHOLD OF CHANGE: THE INMATES AND WILD HORSES OF CAÑON CITY, COLORADO

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To an outsider, the Wild Horse Inmate Program (WHIP) may seem like an equestrian training facility that utilizes inmate labor. Upon closer examination, the human-animal relationship that develops transforms both inmates and mustangs, preparing them for life beyond the Cañon City, Colorado correctional facility. This narrative examines the WHIP program and identifies learned skills necessary for reincorporation into society. Note: Inmates' names have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

In a moment, life can change. We are constantly confronted with choices that can have long-term ramifications. Making the right choice is often associated with the amount of privilege bestowed upon us by society. Those not afforded such privileges may not be as lucky.

The incarceration rate has increased significantly in the United States over the past few years (Haeyoun, Park, Nguyen, & Carter, 2008). As a nation, we often do not want to think about those who perpetrate crimes. However, rehabilitating inmates must be part of the equation if we are to reduce prison populations and incorporate them into society. Polls have shown that the American public endorses the idea that inmates should learn a skill or trade while incarcerated. Learning a trade will do little good if there are no employment opportunities in the community upon release (Mann, 1999). The questions that plague rehabilitation programs are "Do they work?" and "How do you measure success?"

In 2000, while doing research for my dissertation, I made my first visit to Cañon City, Colorado. I had an opportunity to observe the Wild Horse Inmate Program (WHIP). It was not until recently that I realized the transformative power of that program for both humans and horses. I watched an inmate work with a mustang. Now, nearly eight years later, he is making national headlines for all the right reasons (Amann, 2005; McKeown, 2004).

Larry's journey from troubled youth, to prison inmate, and finally to his position as an assistant manager of an equestrian center supervising six employees is well documented (McKeown, 2004). Larry provides hope to

those who come after him. The inmates and the horses may change, but the transformative process remains the same. For the mustangs, this program offers them a way out of holding facilities and into new homes across the United States. The power of the human-animal relationship is at the core of this transformation. To understand how this process occurs, a closer look at the Colorado Correctional Industries' WHIP is warranted.

Colorado Correctional Industries Wild Horse Inmate Program

The West conjures up images of outlaws, saloons, and shoot-outs in the middle of some dusty little town. Cañon City has a long history of wild horses and inmates. Located about 40 miles southwest of Colorado Springs, it is home to nine state and four federal prisons.

In 1871, John Shepler became the first inmate before Colorado was even recognized as a state. Since that time, there have been notorious inmates, significant riots, and memorable escapes. There have also been dedicated employees who have carried out the mission of the Colorado Department of Corrections (CDOC) that emphasizes the importance of ensuring public safety while at the same time providing self-improvement opportunities for inmates. Perhaps the focus on rehabilitation stems from the unique cultural context; 16% of Fremont County is incarcerated and the majority of residents work for the CDOC. The innovative wild horse program is a blend of history, culture, and the mission of the CDOC (Schwartz, 2001).

Because of a highly creative partnership with United States Bureau of Land

Management (BLM), wild horses or mustangs are rounded up on public lands and transported to the holding facility at the East Cañon complex. The BLM provides the feed and the adopters. The CDOC provides minimum security inmates who are prepared in all aspects of horse care, ranging from veterinarian and farrier skills to training and handling. Once the mustangs are trained, they are offered to the public for adoption (Wheeler, 1998).

The Transformative Process

From an etic perspective, WHIP looks like any equine training facility. Brian Hardin, manager of the program, acknowledges:

Some people may think that working with horses under the bright blue Colorado sky might seem more like a vacation than punishment. The program teaches inmates communication skills and responsibility and gives them goals and skills they will need when they are released. (Gazette, 2000)

It is not until you witness the relationship that develops between inmates and horses that the process can be truly understood. Both horse and inmate exist in a liminal state or "betwixt and between." Neither have a socially accepted role. There is a separation from a prior life, but they are not yet reincorporated into another society (Turner, 1964). The roles of teacher and student vacillate between the horse and the inmate. Both move through the process together. Both have entered this liminal state against their will, skills that were previously used are no longer viable, and new skills must be learned if they hope to leave the facility. Each step requires coping strategies and the opportunity to learn new skills. There are primarily four general steps to the process: 1) intake, 2) selection, 3) reciprocal training, and 4) reintegration into society.

I once quipped to someone next to me while I was watching the inmates work with the horses, "This is my dream job!" However, that person pointed out to me that I would have

to commit a crime in Colorado, be convicted, be sent to this facility, and then compete with thousands of inmates to secure one of the 40 or so wild horse program positions. In addition, which I think was the greatest deterrent, I could not leave my work site.

Every inmate is processed the same way. "During day 1, the prisoner's identity is verified, he is fingerprinted, pictures are taken and a prisoner identification tag is generated, and medical and mental health screens are conducted" (Hardyman, Austin, & Peyton, 2004, p. 16). Mustangs are treated in much the same manner.

Capturing or rounding-up mustangs is a part of actively managing the herds on public lands, which is dictated by the Free-Roaming Wild Horse and Burro Act of 1971 (18 U.S. Code 47). Horses under the age of five tend to make the best candidates for adoption. Once captured, they are transported to a holding facility like the one at Cañon City for processing. They receive vaccinations and are freeze-branded for identification. These horses that once roamed free on thousands of acres are now placed in paddocks.

After this initial processing, an acute sense of confinement confronts both inmates and horses. At this time, those that are able to adapt to their new surroundings will have additional opportunities presented to them. There are currently 40 positions available in the wild horse program. Inmates are chosen from Four-Mile Correctional Center, a minimum restrictive facility, based on their interest in the program. Most of the inmates have no prior experience with horses. Inmates know that if they do not work hard, they can be easily replaced. This is another opportunity for inmates to show that they are serious about change.

Not every inmate or every mustang is chosen for training. The horses and inmates must have a willingness to learn. They must want to change. Horses that have vices or are difficult to handle will be passed over for a more compliant counterpart. In essence, the selection process is equally competitive. If one is chosen for this program, there is an implied sense of hope. This is a pivotal stage since someone has recognized that a particular

inmate or horse has the ability to be reincorporated into society. In retrospect, this may have been the most important step in Larry's transformation and for others who will follow him. Wanting to change is important, but someone else providing an opportunity for it to be realized creates a link between the inmate and society.

Once the horses and inmates have been chosen for participation, the training begins. The program utilizes humane techniques employed by trainers like Bryan Neubert and Clinton Anderson that focus on teaching safe horse-human interactions. For the first few weeks, inmates simply feed, water, and clean the paddocks, habituating the horses to human proximity. Once the horse no longer fears the caretakers, it graduates to halter training. There the horse is taught to lead and is desensitized to care by farriers, groomers, and veterinarians. If the horses progress through this, the inmates will train them under saddle.

Although the outsider may see this simply as horse training, it is important to emphasize that most of these inmates have no prior equine knowledge. Most of these horses are about 1,000 pounds. The inmate cannot rely on intimidation or physical control. New skills must be learned: the ability to read body language, to identify challenging contexts, and to react safely to explosive situations. These skills cannot happen without an awareness of others and a certain level of empathy (Strimple, 2003).

At the same time, the horses learn to trust the trainers through consistent training methods. If the horse is difficult to control, it is likely that the trainer has missed a step in the gentling process. The horse is doing what it is taught. This is a reflection on the inmate. Recognizing how the inmate's behavior impacts another living being is vital to his reincorporation into society. In addition, taking responsibility for the horse's progress, the inmates learn to take pride in their work, enhance their self-esteem, and develop a deep affection for their students.

On a recent trip, I spoke to another inmate. Jay reminded me of Larry as he talked about how the program gave him an opportunity to learn about himself and gain skills he never

imagined possible. Jay told me, "I have only had a saddle on this horse about twice, but I can show you all the different stages of training. This is Ruby. I named her for her color. She learns really quickly. I guess I will be sorry to see her go." Jay halted the three year-old mare from Wyoming and proceeded to the round pen. I could tell that he was excited to show me what he'd taught Ruby.

In the wild, most of these horses have learned to move away from the pressure exerted by a lead stallion or mare. The process for training these horses builds on those skills. The distraction-free environment of the round pen allows for the horse to focus on its trainer. The approach is one of teaching rather than punishment. As Jay moves about the round pen, Ruby easily changes her direction or gate. It is like watching a dance. As Ruby changes gates, Jay verbally asks for what he wants, "Walk...., Trot...., Lope." Whenever Jay utters, "Whoa!" Ruby turns and she faces him.

Once the horses are easily directed around the round pen and know how to stop on command, the blanket and saddle are introduced. Whenever Ruby shows resistance, Jay slows the process down and backs up to a previous level of success. It is obvious that this process requires both patience and the ability to read body language. "Every horse is different. But, all of these horses get a lot of love," Jay says as he grabs the blanket and saddle. After just 20 minutes, Jay is able to saddle Ruby for the third time without incident. "She's a quick learner. I don't have to go through every step with her. Some horses needed more." It was time to end this training session.

For inmates like Larry and Jay who reach this level of the program, much has been learned. There is compassion for another living being. There is awareness that sometimes there is more than one answer to a problem and patience may be the best choice. The lessons learned through these human-animal relationships are not easily quantified (Turner, 2007). However, meeting the players prior to and after involvement with the program, I saw a clear transformation.

On my last trip to Cañon City, I asked Jay if it was hard to see the horses adopted. "I

know they are going to a good home. I feel good about that." With a bit more prodding, Jay admitted that he remembers some horses more than others. There is sadness about seeing relationships end. However, we all experience this throughout life. Letting go is probably the hardest lesson many of us will ever learn.

Personal Reflections

The Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd Edition, is one of only a few that has an entry for the word "liminal." It is derived from the Latin term *limen* and means threshold. My visits to WHIP remind me that both inmates and equines are at a threshold of change. This change requires individual hard work, but it also requires that society provide opportunities once the participants graduate. For Larry, both individual drive and societal support collaborated to create a new beginning (Harrison & Schehr, 2004). I can only hope that this will be true for Jay and others who participate in the program.

As for Ruby and her equine counterparts, there are always more screened adopters than trained horses. It is amazing how much a horse can learn in only 90 days of training. Equally remarkable is how much an inmate can change with just one short-term positive relationship. As we age, cynicism seems to come with relative ease. This program proves that lives, whether human or equine, can be changed. This program gives everyone hope.

For further information about wild horses and burros, please visit:
www.wildhorseandburro.blm.gov.

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