

# HORSES AND PEOPLE HEALING EACH OTHER: THE IMPACT OF PARTICIPATION IN A THERAPEUTIC RIDING PROGRAM

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*Interviews with participants in a therapeutic riding program yielded interesting stories about the important relationships that riders form with the horses they ride in the program. In addition to these relationships, several other factors are identified that help to tell the story of how these programs allow horses and people to heal each other.*

As a developmental psychologist, I (PW) have always been interested in mental health. Only within the past 10 years, however, have I been given the opportunity to observe closely the role that animals play in the mental health of the people with whom they have relationships. I began working as a volunteer in 1998 with a wonderful new local nonprofit organization called Great and Small. The mission of this program is to bring together horses and humans to allow them to help each other. Every horse who works in the program is an animal whose life has taken a turn of some type. In most cases, the horse led a "productive" life as an athlete and competitor or as a school horse, only to outlive his or her perceived usefulness in that role. In each case, however, the horse proves to be very capable of offering a great deal to our riders, whose needs involve primarily unconditional love and patience.

The horses in our program also receive immeasurable benefits from their participation. Whether rescued from unfortunate situations or retired by loving, nurturing owners, our horses find renewed energy and pride while contributing to the rehabilitation of the riders. People who know horses are aware that most horses thrive when given a combination of loving care and a true purpose. The sense of dignity and self-respect that our horses demonstrate is testament to the fact that their involvement produces positive consequences for them as well as the riders whom they help.

Our riders are persons with a variety of special needs: some of them have been victims of physical and sexual abuse, some have medical issues such as autism or cerebral palsy, some have mental retardation, some have behavioral issues, and many have a combination of these conditions. Our program brings caring, noble horses together with brave, determined people, and allows the horses and people to heal each other in a number of profound ways.

## **Jenna and Goldie**

One story that I have found especially compelling involves Jenna. Jenna is a competent, bright, generous woman in her fifties who has multiple sclerosis (MS). The horse with whom she has a special relationship is "Goldie," a very large draft horse whom Jenna describes as a "goddess."

Jenna was diagnosed with relapsing remitting MS 20 years ago at the age of 38. Prior to this diagnosis, she was an extremely active woman who enjoyed many outdoor activities, such as skiing, hiking, biking, camping, backpacking, and cross-country skiing. In fact, at the time of her diagnosis, Jenna owned and operated an outdoor adventure business that involved taking clients on backpacking and hiking trips that covered many miles per day. Jenna describes a typical day in this business as follows: "I would comfortably hike about 10 miles with my clients, with a pack on my back. We would

set up camp and then I would go out later and walk after dinner because I had so much energy left even after working all day." Several months after being diagnosed with MS, Jenna noted: "I could walk only about six miles in the time that I used to be able to hike 10 miles."

Jenna's physical capabilities have gradually diminished such that she began using canes periodically to help her walk, beginning 13 years ago. Now she uses an electric wheelchair when she is outside of her house. Her current diagnosis is "secondary progressive MS," for which she says there is no prescribed medical therapy that has been especially helpful to her.

Jenna describes MS as "a disease of loss." She says, "I lost the ability to ride a bike. I lost the ability to ski. These were two activities that I loved. I lost the ability to drive a car without adaptive equipment. I always loved riding horses, but I was afraid that I lost that ability, too." It was a medical doctor who offered her some profound words. Jenna describes the advice this way: "I remember a neurologist at NIH [National Institutes of Health] in the early 90s saying [when asked what Jenna could do about her loss of balance and inability to walk] that I should 'use somebody else's feet.' I thought, 'How am I gonna do that?'"

Then, in 2007, Jenna watched a television program on therapeutic riding. She was especially interested in a story about a couple with a young daughter who could not walk. The workers at the riding program put the three-year-old girl on a horse and, after a short while, she began walking. After seeing this show, Jenna said to herself, "I wonder if that could help me."

Jenna started calling therapeutic riding programs in our area, but they were all "overbooked, with long waiting lists." Jenna explained that she was now significantly overweight, due to her lack of mobility. She needed a large horse that could carry her comfortably and safely. A staff person of another therapeutic riding program referred Jenna to an organization called Great and Small. Jenna said, "The people at Great and Small heard my story and said, 'Come on out and let's see what we can do.'"

Jenna's first lesson was with Huck, a beautiful paint horse with one blue eye and one brown eye. Jenna describes her first lesson as illustrative of the strengths of the program and of the beautiful collaboration that can take place between a person and a horse. Jenna drove to the program in her adaptive van and was very excited to see the "gorgeous" horse she was to ride. She also saw a group of volunteers who had assembled to help her. As Jenna "drives" her wheelchair up the mounting ramp, she cries. She is overcome with emotion about this first encounter with therapeutic riding. She goes on to explain part of what made her cry. She says that, as she prepared to mount Huck, the instructor and the other volunteers, who have "done this a million times," asked her how she would like to mount the horse. The instructor described three or four possibilities, but left the decision up to Jenna. She believes that this was done in order to include her and to allow her to have an empowering role in her therapy. Jenna decided how she wanted to mount, and the six volunteers helped her up on the horse. Jenna then says to me, "Sitting on this horse, I thought I'd died and gone to heaven."

She goes on to describe how the lesson progressed: "There's one person leading the horse, two side-walkers, one person behind, one on the ramp overseeing everything, and one teaching. They pulled together all these people just to get one person on a horse. Huck was so patient, just letting me do this. We went around the ring only once or twice because I had so little strength in my legs." When it came time to dismount, Jenna wondered how she would get off the horse. She says, "They did it. It took three people to help me just to get off. I couldn't believe it."

Jenna went on to ride Huck one more time, and then he "...went to live somewhere else." Jenna then rode Murphy a few times. Murphy is a half draft, "a real sweetheart, older and slower than Huck. It was hard to get him to go forward—his favorite gear was stop." Still, Jenna was making good progress in her riding. "I started mounting from the ramp from a standing position," instead of from her wheelchair.

Eventually, Jenna started riding Goldie. Jenna knows that Goldie is the best of all the horses in the program. Goldie is described by Jenna as a very large, unflappable, businesslike horse "...who knows she's a goddess." Jenna says, "I'm on her back by her good graces. It's very clear that she lets me ride her and I'm very grateful." Jenna adds that, in return for Goldie's generosity, "...when she's had enough, she's had enough, and I thank her and get off." After her lesson Jenna always gives Goldie an apple. Jenna describes how Goldie "...slobbers all over me, and I like it. She's a sweetheart."

When asked what Goldie has given Jenna, she answers in this way: "What she's given me is that I can move through space. I'm not in a wheelchair. I have the experience of moving forward, not in a mechanical way. She gives me the ability to 'walk,' to go places where I couldn't go without her. I used to hike in a national park because it allowed me to go places I couldn't go in a car. Goldie allows me to go places I couldn't go without her. On my first trail ride with Goldie, we just went around the barn, but we were outside, we were in the air. I couldn't ride by myself - I didn't have enough strength - so two volunteers had to go with me." But Jenna describes this as a very freeing experience. MS had taken away all of the outdoor activities that Jenna loved, but Goldie brought back one of the activities for Jenna. "Now I'm riding again. And I love doing this. I get to do something I love two or three times a week."

Jenna also describes some improvements that she has noticed in her physical abilities. She says, "MS colors absolutely everything in my life. It is chronic, capricious, and incurable." Yet, after riding for only six months, Jenna noticed "...great improvement - I have better ankle flexibility. My feet feel better. I can keep my heels down and my toes up. I have better posture. I have enough strength in my legs to get Goldie to weave in and out of poles using only my legs. I have more core stability. In my last lesson I was able to stand up in the stirrups all the way around the indoor ring twice. These may seem like little things, but they're huge."

Jenna explains that it is not just the relationship with the horse that has helped her,

but also the caring of the people who work in the program. Jenna explains that now she needs only two people to help her instead of the six she needed when she first started, but they are always completely devoted to her and to Goldie. She describes the volunteers and teachers as very emotionally supportive. Jenna says, "Every lesson I take is a positive lesson. The instructor always says, 'This is what you've accomplished today.' And we're always looking forward. Once I asked whether I'd ever be able to trot again. My teacher said, 'Of course. That's why I have you standing in your stirrups. We'll definitely trot.'"

What is fascinating is Jenna's reflectiveness about the intangible things that the interactions with the horses seem to bring the riders in this program. She says, "I see children with autism with so little control over their environment. The world is just huge for them. And they get on a horse and they get this really big animal to respond to them. They can control it. It's the same with me and MS. I can't control it. But the riding is empowering. And it's a two-way street. I am empowered because the horse responds to me. But I also respond to the horse, listening to her, to what she needs from me. The relationship is important. Goldie lets me ride her but I'm very clear that when she's done, I respect her and I stop riding. She's good to me. She has all the spirit and ego that a goddess has."

Jenna also describes the sense of community at the barn. She tells a story about a day when another rider was just finishing his lesson as she arrived for hers. The teacher told her about the "amazing" things that the previous rider had done. "They want to celebrate everyone's success and they want us to know about each other's improvements."

According to Jenna, everyone in the program also cares very much about the horses. "The kids love them. The workers love them. I love just going out there and watching the horses because they have such different personalities and they have really different relationships with each other, too." Jenna describes the horses as very well cared for by the staff at the barn. And she says that the horses seem to inspire in the volunteers and riders a sense of generosity and nobility. Jenna

was so inspired by Goldie and the people who work with her in the program that she held a fundraiser at the barn for her birthday this year. She invited some of her friends to meet Goldie and get to know the horse that has made such a difference in her life. Jenna describes the day this way: "We were like a bunch of little kids, just so happy to pet Goldie and give her treats. It was a very special day." Jenna's friends donated a significant amount of money to the program that day, inspired by Goldie's role in the amazing progress of their friend.

Finally, Jenna describes her belief that, instead of forcing or coercing the horses to let the riders ride them in the program, "...the horses let us do this." She believes that it is great that the emphasis is to try to "...understand the horse, the mechanics, what makes the horse go." In doing so, "...we do better by the horse and the relationship." She concludes, in thinking about her involvement with Goldie and with Great and Small: "It's been absolutely everything to me."

### **Katrice and Bear**

Another inspiring story about the impact of a relationship with a special horse involves Katrice. Through interviews with Katrice, as well as her instructor and her "mother," I was able to learn of the broad and deep effects that a relationship with a horse and a number of caring people can have on a person.

Katrice is a 17-year-old girl who has developmental delays and learning issues. Her disabilities stem from an abnormality on chromosome 18Q, resulting in cognitive deficiencies as well as motor coordination problems. Still, according to her mother, "She can ride a horse with no problem." She goes to a "special" school year round. She has been Erin's foster child since Katrice was four, but Erin calls Katrice her "daughter."

Erin reports that Katrice grooms and rides "her" horse, Bear, once a week. She has been riding for several years, but riding Bear and working at Great and Small as a volunteer over the last year have played a strong role in her emotional maturation. She volunteers as a leader and side-walker every Saturday. She is so devoted to Bear and to her work that she "...didn't want to go to Florida on our family

vacation because she didn't want to miss out; she wanted to ride Bear every Saturday as usual." Katrice has been riding at Great and Small for several years, but she only started riding Bear a year ago, when he arrived, and Katrice "...loved him right away." According to Erin, Katrice "...loves that horse. He's her best friend, her buddy." Katrice has "...tons of pictures of him." There is an amazing level of trust between them.

In addition to the emotional support that Katrice feels from Bear, Erin reports that Katrice's participation in the program has really improved her physical coordination, her academic achievement, and her maturity level. Katrice used to exhibit "...inappropriate social behaviors, but no more." She has matured in how she speaks "...to adults; her poise, her manners, shaking hands, making eye contact, all these things have improved." The responsibilities of caring for Bear and working in the program have contributed to a dramatic increase in her "initiative." Katrice is also reportedly "very unselfish now. She takes pictures of other riders and their horses and she can't wait for me to develop them so she can give them to the kids the next week."

Erin reports that she has seen major improvements in Katrice's academic ability as well. "Her reading level has improved two grade levels in one year; her math ability has improved several grade levels in one year." Erin thinks that this is because Katrice has found something she loves (Bear) and a place where she doesn't feel different. Erin tells me that Katrice says, "I'm just one of the volunteers." When asked why Katrice has shown such progress over the past year, Erin says that Katrice goes to a school that is "...really good for her, but the majority of her improvement is from Great and Small." Erin believes that this is due to a number of factors, including the "...very positive feedback from teachers" and volunteers as well as the encouragement that the riders give each other. She also has noticed that "...the riders and teachers and volunteers show respect for the horses and for the riders," and she believes that this is a very important element of the program. Erin says, in closing, that Katrice loves Bear and she loves Laurie, her instructor.

Finally, I have the opportunity to talk to Katrice about her relationship with Bear and her work at Great and Small. When she calls me, I am amazed at how articulate and mature she sounds. She immediately begins to describe for me the work she does as a mentor for new volunteers. She exhibits a sense of pride in her ability to teach others what she knows about horses and riders. "Some of the volunteers don't know how to hold the rope. They'll wrap it around their hands. So I'll explain what to do and why." When asked how she feels when she is mentoring and assisting in the riding lessons, Katrice says, "I feel proud that I teach the kids who don't know how to ride how to sit in the saddle straight. I help them if they're off balance. It's a great feeling to do that because I'm helping someone who's never had that experience." She explains further, "Some of the riders have autism but they're very able to ride, and I know they can. But sometimes they don't want to try."

When asked why, Katrice says, "I think they don't want to try because they're having a bad day or they're sad about something. But I'll tell them, 'Come on, you can do it.' I'll put a happy face on and tell them what to do." When asked for an example, Katrice reports, "One day, one little girl didn't want to mount. I was on the other side of the horse and we were on the ramp. I kept saying, 'Come on, you can do it;' but she wouldn't get on. The trainers got her on the horse and she started crying. I think she was a little bit afraid. But then when she was on the horse, she stopped crying and smiled." When I ask Katrice how she responded when the little girl cried, she says, "I put on a happy face because she's gonna see it and feel stronger." I ask Katrice how she felt when the little girl, then, smiled. Katrice says, "I just felt happy when I saw her smile. I felt proud of her and of me. I thought, 'You did it. Good job.'"

I want to know how Katrice knows how to respond to the riders whom she assists. Katrice says, "It just comes to me." She goes on to describe her work with a child who has autism: "Sometimes, I'll use sign language—I know 'thank you' and 'yes' and 'no.' I'll just try different things. Some of the time, I'll say,

'Here, look at my face,' just to get her attention. Sometimes, I'll say, 'Here, brush the horse,' and I'll brush with her, hand over hand."

Next, our discussion turns to Katrice's relationship with Bear. She says, "I love him so much." I ask Katrice to describe the first time she met Bear. She says, "I got on him and I was nervous. I thought he was so big, but he was also calm and that made me feel calm and happy. He was just there for me, just listening to me. It was a click right away." I ask how Katrice feels about Bear now, after riding him and caring for him for a year. She describes their relationship this way: "I trust Bear so much; I talk to him about my feelings. When I'm mad I'll just whisper to him and he doesn't talk back. I tell him secrets. He makes me so happy because he's my own horse and I love him so much and I just love being with him. I love him." When I ask what Bear "gives" her, Katrice says, "He gives me a friend, my best buddy. We depend on each other."

Bear, too, has been helped through his involvement at Great and Small. When he first arrived, he was cranky and unhappy, trying to bite the volunteers as they tacked him up for lessons. He had been donated to the program by very nurturing owners who attended to all of his needs, yet he did not demonstrate affection for people, as some horses do. Shortly thereafter, however, Bear began to receive consistent, loving care from several volunteers as well as from Katrice. Bear blossomed in the care of these gentle people, who wanted only to make his days joyful. Katrice started grooming and riding Bear every Saturday and their relationship led to a sense of trust between them that has benefited both of them considerably.

### Conclusions

Through 10 years of involvement in this program and through the interviews I conducted for this article, I have observed a number of interesting factors that seem to contribute to the well-being of the riders who participate in the program. What has been astonishing is the fact that everyone with whom I spoke agrees that participation in the Great

and Small program provides therapy for the riders, the volunteers, the teachers, and the family members. Several volunteers explain that the patience and nobility of the horses inspire the volunteers' and teachers' nurturing of the riders and their families. Laurie, the instructor who was interviewed above, stated, "The reason I got involved was I wanted to be around horses. But within two weeks, it was all about the kids *and* the horses." And the riders and the horses have an amazing impact on each other as well as on the teachers and volunteers. The program seems to be a system of interactions among the people and the horses, all of whom seem to have some sort of understanding that they are healing each other through their work in the program.

In attempting to analyze how this healing takes place, I thought back to the start of the program. Our plan was to employ Bandura's self-efficacy model (Bandura, 1977) in our teaching. Self-efficacy refers to the confidence that one has in one's ability to achieve a task. The model asserts that one can help people to develop self-efficacy through the combination of specific strategies, including mastery experiences, vicarious experience, and verbal persuasion.

The mastery experience component of the model refers to placing people in situations in which they cannot fail. This component is implemented by asking riders to make very small, incremental steps in their riding, rather than asking them to attempt huge leaps of progress from one lesson to the next. The vicarious experience aspect of the model is implemented by offering, when needed, a model of the new behavior that the instructors ask the riders to perform. The verbal persuasion component refers to offering only positive feedback to the riders at all times. Every attempt that the rider makes is responded to in a positive manner by the instructor and the volunteers. Even when making corrections to the rider's form, the volunteer is careful to point out something positive that the rider is doing.

We train our volunteers to implement the concepts of this model and the volunteers, including very new volunteers with significant disabilities, employ the methods consistently.

We believe that this takes place because the teachers and long-term volunteers use the methods in the presence of the newer volunteers, so there is constant observation and imitation of the strategies that we aim to employ. In the case of Katrice, who was a rider in the program for several years before beginning her work as a volunteer, it appears that the use of the methods of positive feedback and emotional support for the riders is second nature to her, thus her comment that knowing how to interact with the riders "just comes to me."

In addition to the theoretical model that underlies the training and teaching that occur in this program, the relationships that the people and horses forge effortlessly through their mutual participation are very powerful. The horses, without any overt knowledge of doing so, provide positive feedback simply by sensing what the riders need and giving it to them. The riders, therefore, experience the feeling of trusting the horses because the horses make the riders feel safe and nurtured.

Interestingly, many of the riders, instructors, and volunteers report that they are initially drawn to Great and Small because they want to be with horses. What they find once they arrive is that they benefit greatly from the interactions they have with the other people as well. The ability to build relationships based upon trust, dependability, empathy, and empowerment is a beautiful product of a number of people and horses being brought together under extraordinary conditions in order to heal each other.

#### Reference

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Note: Names of the riders have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

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Verge is a recent graduate in psychology at Marymount University. Holly and Melissa worked for two years as research assistants assessing the improvement of riders in the Great and Small program. This research team of four professionals has presented several papers about the improvements exhibited by Great and Small riders at national conferences. Comments regarding this article can be sent to: [martytrish@aol.com](mailto:martytrish@aol.com).



Bear. Photograph by Patricia Westerman.

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