

Introducing HorsePower Experiential Learning Program (HELP)

There are times when I'm around horses that a smell takes me back to my childhood. It is only now, as an adult that I realize how blessed I was to enjoy horses during those early years, what memories. This is what **HorsePower Experiential Learning Program** provides for abused and neglected youth – the creation of good childhood memories, something they can hold on to. So often, children who experience abuse, have no memory of their childhood; Perhaps this is a way the brain protects those who suffer from such painful memories. HorsePower enables these children to learn about horses over a 7-week session, for an hour and a half each week. They are given a horse that they work with weekly that helps them develop a relationship of respect and trust which in turn increases their self-esteem, helps them overcome fears and teaches life coping skills that could last a life time.

Pull on the boots of a typical child who comes to HorsePower. His name is David* and he

has lost his entire family due to abuse and neglect. David is thrown into the unpredictable foster care system where eventually, he is, adopted by a family. Unfortunately, the stress of adopting a child who struggles with emotional and behavioral problems contributes to the divorce of David's adoptive parents. As time passes, his behaviors are too much for his now single mom to handle so she sends him to a residential treatment center and eventually terminates her rights. Imagine, as a child, not only being rejected once by your birth family but a second time by your adopted family...it's hard to imagine even as an adult. That's when David finds himself at HorsePower, paired with a horse named Pocahontas. His "private" conversation with his horse goes like this... "Poco my mom had to make a very tough decision and told me that when I leave the treatment center I won't come home but go to a foster home. I'm worried about my mom." This is the first expression David has shared with

anyone since receiving the devastating news. What if Poco was not there for David, how long would he have walked around before he found someone that he felt safe to share his sadness and worries?

In the fall of 2001, while volunteering with a horse therapy program for physical disabilities I realized there were not any equine programs in Kansas City that focused on mental health. That following winter I was able to develop a curriculum along with a grad student from Washburn University who studied mental health equine programs throughout the United States. From there, HorsePower was birthed. The first group of students were from Langsford House, a boy's home for first time offenders, and the experience was rich. Watching those young teens go out to the pasture and halter their horse was amazing. It didn't matter if it took 10 minutes or 40 minutes, it was all about the experience, the challenge, the opportunity to overcome. The boys had to fig-

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ure out how to present themselves in a non-threatening way that would draw in a horse. At the time we had many skeptics watching from the barn wondering if this exercise would ever work watching from the barn. Then one by one, each boy haltered their horse, they even encouraged each other. What a beautiful site it was, completely fulfilling to those who were the first volunteers.

That was 13 years ago, since then HorsePower has worked with many organizations including Marillac, Operation Breakthrough, Crittenton, Ozanam, and Hope House to name a few. HorsePower has been honored to help hundreds of children over the years. A staff member of one of our clients once said “You know when it’s a HorsePower day, there is excitement in the air at the facility”. For many children it’s the highlight of their week. While others may act out right before leaving for a class because they don’t think they deserve to come to HorsePower. HorsePower Instructors occasionally see former students in the

community and when we introduce ourselves as knowing their child (fostered or adopted) because of HorsePower, the family member’s face lights up and they often share what a profound affect HorsePower had in their child’s life. HorsePower has been around long enough that now, we have former students coming back to serve as volunteers – an amazing affirmation to the success for HorsePower in their lives.

HorsePower is a completely volunteer run organization. Each five-student class requires 12 volunteers: One Instructor, one Lead HorseHandler, five Mentors and five HorseHandlers. Mentors focus on the safety of the student while encouraging them to accomplish their goals. HorseHandlers focus on the safety and mental health of the horses. As HorsePower is a mental health program, our horses tend to receive more stress than horses working with a physical disability program, largely because the student is not congruent with their outward being and their internal emotions. Since horses are so intuitive they tend to absorb the student’s stress or mixed emotions that

are being emitted and our volunteers are there to make sure the horses have plenty of opportunities to relieve their stress. During 2015 we had over 80 individual volunteers serving with many others supporting the program through donations.

Did you know that Missouri is the 48th lowest when it comes to financial support of foster families? Money for extracurricular activities for these struggling children is just not a reality. So for the past few years HorsePower has partnered with foster families so that the children can attend HorsePower at no charge aside from the small deposit required to hold the child’s spot. This is only made possible by locating people or organizations in the community who want to sponsor a child. We have seen many other horse therapy programs come and go because horses are expensive to

maintain. HorsePower is possible through donations by individuals and companies, grants, and fundraising events.

HorsePower welcomes groups to do projects & fundraisers, donate cowboy boots, helmets or horse magazines for the students, gift cards for feed, salt/mineral blocks, fly spray etc for the horses. A current project for HorsePower is a new shed to hold the pasture supplies like hay, muck buckets & forks, feed, feed tubs, halters & lead ropes. Our goal is to raise \$ 2325.00 to purchase the shed. All to assist in the care of the precious horses who serve the children of HorsePower. In addition, HorsePower is also looking for approximately 15-20 acres for a forever home. To learn more about HorsePower visit

www.horsepowerkids.org or like us on Facebook at HorsePower Experiential Learning Program. If you are interested in sponsoring a student or making a donation of any other type or size, please contact me at 816.289.2872 or horsepower@kc.rr.com. Donations may

be sent to HorsePower c/o Torey Geiger, 3228 SE Brookside Dr, Lee's Summit, MO 64063.

*names of the children have been changed for their privacy.

Torey Geiger is the Director of HorsePower Experiential Learning. Over 12 years ago God put a desire in Torey's heart to use horses to bring healing to children with emotional and behavioral problems. While developing the HorsePower program, she and her husband Mike decided to become foster adopt parents. Both pursuits focused on helping abused & neglected children. Having owned and shown horses in her youth, connecting with a grad student at Washburn University to create a study on HorsePower and pursuing PATH (formerly NARHA) certification all

culminated in the creation of the HorsePower program, helping hundreds of children through the years. Torey is a foster adoptive parent and works for Alter Counseling Services as a Family Support Specialist. Her experience and knowledge is endless.

