

Horse Therapy - Equine treatment center helps addicts recover

Carl Cleveland lost his mother and grandmother within a year. To escape the pain, he began drinking and using drugs heavily.

As a result of his addictions, Cleveland said he's seen several drug rehabilitation centers and many people who flunk out. He decided to do something different, so he spent nearly three weeks at a place where horses are the primary source of therapy.

"I got a lot of purpose in doing that, I know it," he said. "Humans have got a lot in common with horses,"

Cleveland, 43, is a former client of Spirit Lake Recovery, a treatment center for people with addiction disorders on 40 acres of farm land in McKenzie.

Ginger Kelley said that when most people think of drug addicts or alcoholics, they think of what they've seen in the movies or on TV. But in reality, the 30-year-old husband and father who got injured on the job is just as likely to become a case of drug addiction, she said.

"They come from every walk of life," she said. "People are starting to see more and more of this now. There's always somebody famous - like Michael Jackson or Anna Nicole Smith - dealing with problems."

Kelley is with Spirit Lake Recovery, which started in April. The center includes a home that houses 16 clients and an arena, which is home to five horses and a donkey.

Those animals play a major role in helping clients fight the disease of addiction, Kelley said.

"Addiction usually starts with dependency," she said. "It starts with their doctor as legitimate medical needs."

Cleveland, who never spent much time around horses, said he has told others who are in recovery about the unique therapy.

"What I loved most of all were the horses," he said. "Putting myself in with the horses was a good experience for me that I've never had before. I can't think of a rehab center that's better. They helped me a whole lot."

At Spirit Lake Recovery, therapy comes in the form of art, music, Bible study and horse-keeping. Everyone has 90 minutes of horse therapy each day, Kelley said.

"What we do is not horseback riding; it's active problem solving," she said. "It's hard to understand until you bring up an example."

An obstacle course is set up, and clients must lead their horses through it without using their hands or forcing the animal. At the end of the course is a beam the horse must walk over to complete the exercise. Buckets of horse feed are set out along the way as temptations or distractions for the horse, Kelley said.

"What do those temptations, obstacles represent? Does the client ask for help?" she said. "Do they give up? While they're doing this, their therapist is watching the activity. It gives them a chance to observe and talk about it with their clients afterwards."

In addition to equine-assisted therapy, clients spend a lot of time creating a bond with the horses, Kelley said. The clients do morning and evening feedings, clean the stalls and groom the horses.

"Each person is assigned their own horse to care for," she said. "Most haven't had a trust-based relationship in a long time. There is no judgment, so they're building trust from square one. A horse has no judgment, so clients see them as (a) new entity in their life. It's where it all starts. "

Mike Kelley, Ginger's father, is the horse specialist at Spirit Lake. He runs the 90-minute therapy sessions and is there to protect the horses and the clients.

"We use horses because they're uncontrolled and unexpected," he said.

A horse will sense what a client is doing or feeling and mimic the client, Mike said.

"The horse becomes a mirror, and the client is reflected in the horse," he said. "The horse gives a more correct reflection. Any hidden fears or anxiety or any anger you didn't want to know about will come out through the horse."

Those reflections become a topic of conversation in the post-obstacle discussion, where clients begin to see metaphors to their lives, Mike said.

"I'm extremely pleased that it's working as well as it does," he said. "I'm confident that we have divine guidance to help us get the maximum benefits and results."

Ginger Kelley said that after the 40-day stay, a relationship has formed between horse and client.

"They come in sometimes fearful," she said. "But after the 40 days, they've bonded. The clients take pictures with their horse, they show their families their horse. It becomes a real bridge to recovery."

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