

When the friend who has your back is a horse



- 1 Kristie Stokes sits high and proud on the reins as she guides Melody, a 1,000-plus-pound draft horse¹⁾, around the barn. In her pink helmet, pink sweatshirt, and pink boots, Kristie follows a course set by her instructor, who offers instructions, and often encouragement, in the center. Kristie, who has special needs, sees Melody each week at Dream Catchers, a therapeutic horseback riding center. For the last three years, she's visited the 22-acre ranch for the physical and mental benefits of horsemanship — structured around programs from speech therapy to psychotherapy. Those benefits, experts say, stem from the trust between horse and rider, a relationship like the one Kristie has with Melody.
- 2 Dream Catchers is one of a growing number of therapeutic riding centers across the country. Serving more than 800 participants since its founding in 1993, the center has been a respite for many seeking the mix of patience, honesty, and camaraderie that, advocates say, only a horse can provide. That relationship can empower, teach, build trust with, and help heal participants — even if their partner is a 1,000-pound animal. “When you come to that animal with all of your junk, with all of your past issues, with who you are physically, that horse doesn't care,” says Rhonda Hamlin, a mental health specialist. “What he cares about is, can I trust you?”
- 3 Served by a full staff and small cavalry of almost 300 volunteers, the ranch is a collection of barns, fences, and pastures. Around 80 to 100 participants visit each week. The program's 15 horses — and two therapy dogs — all required careful selection, for not every horse can be a therapy horse. It takes the right mix of personality and physicality — a blend of patience, sensitivity, and steadiness.

- 4 When Ms. Hamlin works with new clients, she first takes them to the pasture and lets them watch. Often, she says, a horse will come near, greeting a participant's outreached hand near its nose — a "horse handshake." Somehow, she says, 30. This is often the start of a special bond.
- 5 Dream Catchers has breeds ranging from miniature horses to medium-sized Welsh ponies to large draft horses like Melody. A connection in size matters because a horse's gait resembles a human's. That resemblance helps a participant build core strength and improve posture. Once a rider finds his or her horse, it's all about growing their relationship.
- 6 "Horses are prey animals, which means they're extremely — even if imperceptibly — sensitive to their environment. They can pick up a person's feelings or emotions even before the person themselves kind of acknowledges them," says Ms. Hamlin. "So in a rough sense, I can use them as a barometer and know immediately what's happening with a client just by watching what the horse does." That enhanced perception also requires participants to be honest, according to Ms. Hamlin. It can spot duplicity. If a rider presents himself or herself one way but is feeling another, the horse will stay away.
- 7 Unlike a human, who may hold a grudge, horses remain in the present, Ms. Hamlin adds. That quality allows riders to feel accepted more easily by horses than by humans, she says. Whenever participants make a mistake, she reminds them that the horses will always be willing to start over.
- 8 Karen Stokes, mother of Kristie, says she sees the change in her daughter when they come to the ranch. Kristie smiles more, talks more, and parades around her confidence. But for Kristie, a visit to Dream Catchers is just a visit to Melody — or "Mel," as she calls her. "I'm happy when I see her," she says.

adapted from *csmonitor.com*, 2020

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