



God's quiet healers



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February 2017 – At Canyonview College in Silverton, Oregon, students focus not on proving themselves through test scores, but on a fulltime course of ministry and service – all revolving around horses. When not hard at work in the fields and barns, they are diligently studying the Bible and preparing for Christian ministry. After two years at the vocational college, they easily transition into a job using those very skills.

“Some of our students go into horse-specific ministries,” said Ren Bannerman, equestrian center director. “Others go to work in the horse industry, not necessarily direct ministry, but all are called to spread the Word in the workplace, the home, public life. These students are trained to disciple people.”

Developing discipleship skills begins with various programs at Canyonview Ministries in addition to the college. College students work in camps, and later lead a camp. The equestrian focus is a feature that draws people and helps make connections.

“They come wanting that horse experience, and find these people who love Jesus and are cheerful and kind, and they leave with so much more,” said Chris Kinman, associate director of Canyonview Ministries. “We use an analogy comparing the relationship between horse and rider to building a relationship with God.”

Mirroring mental health

Many secular groups also employ horses to reach people for specific purposes. Near Elgin, Illinois, Operation Horses and Heroes uses equine assisted psychotherapy to help veterans and active duty members of the Armed Forces deal with post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, prosthetics, and other emotional and social challenges.

“We lose 22 veterans a day to suicide,” said founder Gerald Paulsen. “I’m an old school veteran, and it’s really hard to see these younger folks reaching such drastic measures. We also include family members, spouses, and caregivers, which is pretty unique. And its 100% free.”

Paulsen and his team of certified equine therapists and mental health professionals travel to any state where a host facility is arranged.

In the four-day, non-riding program, the horse becomes a vehicle by which participants work through their struggles, providing a mirror into themselves in the way it reflects and responds to their interaction. At the same time, soldiers and veterans find they are not alone.

“We usually get between 30 and 60 volunteers,” Paulsen said. “Our veterans see that people care about them and their service. We have so many tears when they realize what they did for our country is not forgotten.”

Feedback, fitness, function

At Southern Reins in Nesbit, Mississippi, equine assisted therapy includes riding programs for persons with physical, cognitive, and emotional disabilities, such as autism, cerebral palsy, and ADHD.

“In therapeutic riding, hippotherapy, equine assisted learning, and equine facilitated mental health, horses provide biofeedback in a nonverbal way,” said executive director Jill Haag. “It helps people learn how to function in the world and the way their behavior impacts others.”

Not defined as a Christian curriculum, the courses may incorporate basic occupational therapy, physical therapy, and speech-language pathology to allow participants to gain physical and mental advantages as well as improved social skills.

“Our participants can show benefits within minutes of mounting our therapy horses,” said volunteer coordinator Ginna Rauls. “It is truly hard to describe how the connection between the horse and rider can be so healing emotionally. I have seen the lives of volunteers changed as well – so it is all around therapy!” 

More Information

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