

Horses heal at the Anahata Horse Centre



By Nate Smelle

Nestled in the scenic hills of the Maxwell Settlement in Bancroft, is a place where humans and horses come together to help each other heal. The Anahata Horse Centre (AHC) offers a variety of programs and activities designed to help clients living with autism and their families develop better communication and social skills by creating opportunities for them to interact with horses and other animals that reside at the centre. Some of the activities included in the programs offered at the AHC include: nature walks, arts and crafts, obstacle courses and leading the horses along the trail to the lake for a swim.

The programming also focuses on alleviating stress for its participants, said owner/operator Marianne Bertrand.

"The horses take everyone's stress away," she said.

"Unlike these kids we feel stress and no stress, we have the two; they feel stress only. That's why the learning doesn't happen, because people can't learn in a stressful environment."

The main goal of the programs they offer is to make participants feel comfortable. To help their clients they need to be aware of their boundaries and limitations and respect them. If a program plan isn't working for a specific individual or group they need to be able to adjust accordingly if they are to help.

"It's about finding the right opening that will get them through that door to help take away their stress," said Bertrand.

"We know that certain things will help them—contact with the horses, riding them—but doing those things might be too stressful, so you don't just jump straight to the end result. We wait until they're ready. We don't take the child to the horse we take the horse to the child."

AHC program co-facilitator Melissa Gordon recalls one client she worked with who was quite withdrawn and nervous around the rest of the group and the horses when he first arrived at Anahata. Working through his timidity with the help of the horses, staff and volunteers at the AHC, by the end of the program the child had made incredible progress. On the last day off the program he even went for a ride with one of the horses as his new friends encouraged him. Before the program this child's parents said he would not engage with others in public. After working with the horses the boy's mother told Gordon that he became better at socializing with others.

"The other kids that were there were really supporting and rooting for him," said Gordon.

?It is amazing how the animals helped bring the group together. A big piece of our programming is creating community. That extends to the animals as well. The animals are part of our community, as are the volunteers and co-facilitators. We have the families come along sometimes, and occasionally one of the kids will bring a friend. We don't separate people having them stand around while others do activities, we all do it.?

There are currently 18 horses and a large family of other animals living at the AHC. Most of these creatures have been rescued from abuse or other less than ideal circumstances themselves, so they also benefit from this social interaction. Now they enjoy better health, companionship and freedom to explore a 100 acre paradise of pastures, forests, hills and creeks.

?It's so amazing to see how the horses respond with people,? said Gordon.

?They really understand energy in such an interesting way. They are so responsive, and so gentle and compassionate. They are aware.?

After overcoming their own traumatic history many of these animals become healers themselves. They are trained how to facilitate healing, stress reduction and personal growth. It is important when working with animals as facilitators and healers, that each animal's individual boundaries, feelings, choices and intelligence are honoured.

The AHC is looking to expand its programming in 2015 to keep up with demand. They are currently seeking volunteers to help with workshops, general carpentry, farm duties and fundraising.

?Our volunteers are amazing, but we could use more help,? said Bertrand.

?We want to be able to help more people and more animals, so the more help we get the more we can help others.?

For more information on programs visit www.anahatahorsecentre.com, or to get involved with the Anahata Horse Centre as a volunteer contact marianne@muttluks.com.