

Horses help soothe the soul

By Elaine Bombay

A counselling centre in Stirling-Rawdon has been using horses for the past four years to bring awareness and healing to hurting humans.

Denise MacDonald has been a registered marriage and family therapist for 16 years. Four years ago, she began offering equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP) at her practice at Clearview Equine Centre. She has five horses, including two miniatures.

EAP is a collaborative effort between the mental health care professional, a horse professional, the client and the horses, MacDonald explained. The goal is emotional or behavioural change.

Such therapy is used to address a variety of issues such as grief and loss, anger management, and anxiety. Clearview offers a military track as well, to help military members and families with such issues as post-traumatic stress disorder, deployment, resilience and other family needs.

"Clients have felt that it was the most deeply spiritual thing they have ever done," said MacDonald. "It hits them on a different plane."

"Horses are herd animals with unique personalities and moods. How people relate to a horse is the way they relate to a person," said MacDonald. "Horses are experts at non-verbal communication. They pick up on cues.

"You need to be present, in the now, when you are working with a 1,200-pound animal."

There is no riding involved. The focus is developing life skills in the client, not on horsemanship skills. During a session, the horses wear no saddles or halters.

Clients are given specific tasks to accomplish in co-operation with the horses. The tasks will relate to realities in the client's life. For example, a family that is struggling might use props to construct a house and then work together to keep the horses from knocking it down.

MacDonald stressed the importance of the client seeing the link between what they are experiencing with the horses and their real-life issues. The family in the example above may relate the horses which are knocking down their house to specific issues that are causing the fissures in their relationship as a family. Those issues could be things such as fear, negative behaviours or other people. Then they can come up with a plan to deal with those issues.

The skills that the client develops to deal with the horses, they then apply to dealing with their real-life experiences, said MacDonald.

"The horses provide great opportunities for clients to focus on communication, confidence, boundaries and trust. Their self-esteem grows as they successfully complete a task with a large, powerful animal," said MacDonald.

Besides psychotherapy sessions, the centre also offers Spa for the Soul retreats. The retreats are designed to help people set aside their busy lives for a day and reconnect spiritually through a variety of activities, including working with the horses. The retreats are offered from a Christian perspective, but are open to everyone.

Debb Poole participated in such a retreat on Friday, along with five other women.

"At first I was hesitant because of the horses," said Poole, who doesn't have much experience with horses. "The program allowed me to enter their arena slowly and at my own pace. It wasn't intimidating."

One of the exercises the women participated in was to design a course that represented their spiritual journey and then to lead one of the horses through the course. After some failures, Poole came up with the idea to entice one of the horses with food.

"I just used what it needed," she said in the group discussion afterward. The women were challenged to think about needs in their lives and the impact those have in their spiritual life.

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Photo by Elaine Bombay

Denise MacDonald talks to Jewel, one of the horses that she uses in equine-assisted therapy in Stirling last Sunday. MacDonald, a marriage and family therapist, has been using horses in her work for the past four years. She says that horses give people many opportunities to work on self-confidence, communication, boundaries, and other issues they might be dealing with.



Photo by Kayleen Preston

Wade Smart watches his screen as he patiently waits for a fish to swim by and bite his bait Feb. 28 during the Second Annual Scotty Dunlop Fishing Tournament being held throughout the county. After Smart and his friends Rick Taylor and Dwayne Tindale drilled the holes in their hut, a few inches of water flooded the area. A group of around 10 people set up their pop-up ice fishing huts on Wellers Bay.

Fishermen give from the heart during ice fishing tournament

Family benefits from fundraiser to help with medical costs

By Kayleen Preston

The warmth of ice fishers' hearts matched the warmth of the sun during the Second Annual Scotty Dunlop Ice Fishing Tournament last Saturday in the county.

"We want to do this tournament to have a great fun day with a bunch of people that we hang out with, and we probably would be all out here fishin' anyways, but we figured let's do it for a reason for a day, and raise some money," said Morely Dayton one of the tournament's organizers.

Approximately 100 participants fished along frozen waters in the area to raise money for the Pruett family, particularly their seven-year-old son Johnny who has Proximal Femoral Focal Deficiency (PFFD). This non-hereditary birth defect affects leg growth, and causes hip movement problems. The Pruett family also have a son in high school with a mental disability, and have taken in their niece and her eight-month-old son.

The tournament began last year in memory of Scotty Dunlop to raise money for his two children. Ethan and Hunter Dunlop were left to the care of their aunt after the tragic murder of their mother five years ago and the horrifying fatal vehicle accident of their father, Scotty Dunlop.

This year, Ethan and Hunter, along with their grandfather Robert Dunlop, decided that the money should go to a more deserving family.

"I was actually at home and Frank

had sent me a text message, and it was kind of muffled and I didn't really understand, he was just saying 'The tournament...this year...and Johnny,' and I was like 'What? I don't understand?' So then he explained it more and we were floored." Johnny's mother Tami Pruett said about finding out the donations would go towards her family this year.

"Johnny was actually supposed to go fishing, but we ended up in the hospital on Tuesday, because he's lost mobility in his leg, so he had to have extensive therapy on his leg this week. And we weren't supposed to be released until Tuesday, but because there's no therapy over the weekend, they came to us yesterday and told us we could go home today, so we kept it quiet."

Dayton and Dunlop along with the other organizers (Darren Dayton, and Tanya Dunlop) decided to open the tournament to a broader range of people. With the tournament held over one day, participants could fish on any local body of water, and then brought their fish to be weighed at the trophy ceremony in the evening held at Karen and Chad Whitfield's large garage.

Saturday evening, as Frank Dunlop was calling to see if Johnny was feeling up to Skype with him to see all the people who had come out to support him, his mother Tami Pruett revealed their surprise of the doctors releasing them early. She explained they were a few minutes away from the garage.

Emotions overwhelmed the participants and organizers, as Johnny used his walker to walk into the garage. By the end of the evening, every eye had shed at least one tear, from the inspiring accomplishments of the high-spirited young boy, to the surprise entrance, and the \$2,200 that was raised for the family.

The past five years have been a roller coaster of events for the Pruett family, from moving to Ontario from Alberta, to the eight surgeries Johnny has undergone. A doctor in Alberta realized they had misdiagnosed him after performing a few surgeries. From here, the Pruett family decided to get in contact with doctors from Sick Kids, where he was properly diagnosed. Although he has gone through a few surgeries there, and must commute to Toronto weekly for physiotherapy, Johnny is an energetic happy young boy.

When he arrived at the ceremonies, he saw the large first prize trophy and immediately said that he wanted to take it home. Johnny has never received a trophy before in his life, and did not know that the organizers bought him his own trophy. His eyes glistened as he received his trophy with the engraving "Go Johnny Go!" on it.

Local stores donated the prizes that were given out, therefore not costing the organizers a penny. First prize for the biggest pickerel (Doug Morrow) and pike (Mitch Wilson) received a Rapala Cruiser M2 fish hut. Second prize for biggest pickerel (Chuck Kastenhuber) and pike (Tim Wilson) received a Mr. Heater Portable Buddy Heater. Third prize for biggest pickerel was an eight-inch hand auger. Since a third pike was not brought in, the other hand auger was auctioned off to donate more money to the Pruett family.

This would have been Johnny's first time fishing, but organizers promised that in the summer, they would bring him out to experience the freedom of fishing.

Doctors are working towards Johnny's leg to be properly developed to be able to run and play, in his words, like a "normal" child by the time he turns nine.