

Groundbreaking Therapy Pairs Horses, Children

MONTROSE AREA FARM HOSTING FREE SESSIONS SATURDAY

— BY WES SKILLINGS —

It was a dramatic moment for Dana Silkiss. A nine-year-old autistic boy from the Philadelphia area and a horse were brought together for a session of Animal Assisted Psychotherapy (AAP) a few years back. There is something about animals, horses in particular, that seems to break barriers with children with delayed, distorted or nonexistent social skills.

This was more than a kid who struggled at connecting with his peers or adults. This boy hadn't spoken so much as a word to anyone in something like five years—more than half of his life. A close encounter with a horse, of all creatures, changed all that.

"I love this!" were the words the excited child uttered that day.

"It was a breakthrough," Silkiss recalls. "His mother cried for joy."

It unlocked some kind of door the youngster hadn't been able to open in a long time, and Silkiss says the progress from there was steady.

Silkiss is a horse professional and a licensed therapist who works with a licensed mental health professional to help improve the social skills of children between the ages of seven and 12. He and Roya Fahmy, MSW, will be overseeing free sessions of animal assisted psychotherapy at the Norfolk Heritage Farm on Tocco Road near Montrose on Saturday, Jan. 23, between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m.

The case of the nine-year-old who suddenly found his voice is obviously an extreme and very dramatic example of what can be accomplished with animal assisted therapy. The force behind this program, as well as the source of the animals, is the Indraloka Animal Sanctuary, which has a Mehoopany mailing address. Indraloka, which provides a lifetime home for animals of all species, is also moving in the direction of providing opportunities for abused or traumatized children, with the help of psychology professionals and animals.

"It is a collaborative effort between a licensed therapist and an animal behaviorist working with the clients and animals to address treatment goals," an Indraloka spokesperson reports, adding that AAP is



Children with socialization problems, even autistic children, often relate to animals, especially horses. The Indraloka Animal Sanctuary near Montrose will present a free program on Animal Assisted Psychotherapy on Saturday, Jan. 23, between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m.

known for its effectiveness, intensity and brevity. Brevity means short-term or, unlike many psychotherapeutic approaches, does not require a long-term commitment.

Silkiss says horses are a reflection or mirror of the children or adolescents paired with them in terms of their personalities. By utilizing games and exercises and observation methods, Silkiss says both the personalities of the child and the horses unfold in front of them, feeding off each other.

"It's an amazing thing to see," says Silkiss, who specializes in equine assisted psychotherapy and has seen it positively alter lives in sessions from Long Island to Arizona, "and it is sometimes hard to believe how fast this happens."

That mirroring of moods from the horse, reacting negatively to the negative and vice-versa, apparently teaches the child without a word being spoken how his behavior affects others. Horses also exhibit some of the fundamental personality

traits of humans—stubbornness, playfulness and defiance. They can also be moody.

Silkiss says even the therapists are amazed at the outcomes of some of these sessions.

Horses draw both children and adults because they require a lot of care but also represent size and strength.

This is a rather new branch of therapy that is slowly gaining acceptance by professionals. Its potential for breakthroughs among children with autism and personality disorders due to abuse is especially heartening.

As for the Indraloka Animal Sanctuary, it serves as a place for all species to live for their natural lives and bills itself as "a compassionate alternative to suffering, euthanasia or slaughter." Many of the animals there are otherwise not adoptable due to medical and behavioral factors.

Indraloka Animal Sanctuary can be contacted at (570) 763-2908 or via email at office@indraloka.org.

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