

Seeing yourself through a horse's eyes

Equine-assisted learning is as much about understanding horses as about understanding ourselves



BY KAREN DALLIMORE
The writer is a freelance writer and horse fanatic near Orton

Molly zones out to the sound of Zen Garden, music for relaxation. She watches as people gather at the end of the arena, making themselves comfortable in a circle of lawn chairs.

She has no idea why her size is intimidating to some while providing great comfort to others. She doesn't seem to care. To her, all that matters is life at that moment in time, knowing that she feels safe and secure in her two and four-legged herd.

Horses don't see the world the same way we do. While we worry about the future and the past, they live in the moment. Their experience shapes their reactions, but they don't dwell

on things. They react, they get over it, they move on.

It's that way of thinking that seems to help people deal with their own issues.

Some people have low self-esteem, nervous around a horse the size of Molly. By the end of their session at Sierra Acres in Rockwood, the huge, gray Percheron mare may come up and nuzzle them.

The horses are free to roam in the arena while guests become comfortable, first learning a few safety rules about being around horses, then allowing themselves to become grounded in the moment while they explore their own story.

Most have never been around a horse before. It's a voyage of self-discovery, facilitated by the horses.

"The grey horse moved," said one guest. Anne Porteous, facilitator of the group therapy session, wonders why that resonated?

"People are always leaving me," the guest heard herself saying. But maybe the horse didn't move away because of anything personal, suggested Anne? Maybe it was just a

fly? It's a way of figuring out that the actions of others aren't always 'about you'.

Anne runs workshops and private sessions in two programs - equine-assisted learning and equine assisted psychotherapy. She has a gentle and kind way with people, something that also serves her in her full time job as a Registered Nurse and teacher in the nursing degree program at Mohawk College, McMaster University and Conestoga College.

She's a lifelong learner, with special interest in health, coaching, and horses, with the goal of combining her experience and talents with people and horses into a program she calls Unbridled Life Skills Coaching.

"This is my office," she says as she looks around the bright, quiet arena. Her business partners are six horses: Molly, Sierra, Cheyanne, Xena, Charlie and Gunner. There is a horse for every two guests.

Anne simply combines the horses with the people under the same roof and allows them to interact.



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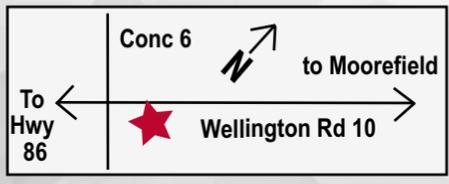
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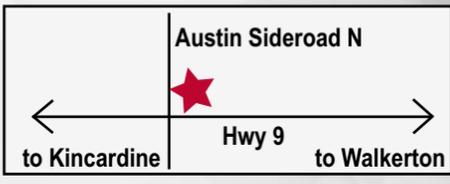
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Molly and Gunner enjoy a scratch, called mutual grooming

She doesn't judge; she doesn't tell anyone why he or she is there, what to say, or what he or she needs to do. She facilitates a way for the horses to interact with the people that will resonate, through maybe grooming the horse, defining personal space, or just becoming comfortable with their size and nature, allowing the horse and the surroundings to become a metaphor for each person's life.

It's about making choices, awareness, non-verbal communication and experiential learning, and it's about making a connection. It doesn't matter

which brush you use, only how the horse reacts to the brush that you chose.

"Very few haven't connected," said Anne. Occasionally someone is not ready for what the horse had to teach. One man was having a hard time joining in until Gunner, the bay Quarter Horse gelding, came over and nuzzled him on the head. Gunner picked him; that was all it took to get him engaged.

Anne has found that the biggest challenge is to have people relinquish themselves, turning off their cell phone and connecting with the animals.

"Horses are about the moment. We've lost that."

A new horse - Charlie - has recently joined the herd. Guests have noticed how the herd reacts to a new member, relating to that feeling of being the new kid on the block.

A herd is similar to a team. People watch, figuring out how they belong in the human herd, in the family or at work, by watching the interaction of the horses, allowing themselves to become part of the herd in the arena.

"Molly enjoys a hug," said Anne, recalling a small woman who stood in front of the mare,

wrapping her arms around the horse's neck while the mare gently drew the woman in to her massive chest with her head, as she would a foal. The other horses will often stand guard while a person interacts with a horse. If anyone tried to come near, Gunner would gently block them, moving in their

way. It's a natural action in the horse herd, looking after one another, looking out for other herd members.

"Horses can be great teachers," said Anne, "if we let them in."

More information can be found at www.unbridledlifekillscoaching.com

Middlesex plowing match at Lucan

The Middlesex Plowmen's Association is hosting its 75th annual Plowing Match on Monday Sept. 7 at the farm of Mark Scott in Lucan.

This year's match will include a number of events throughout the day including: bucket draws; static farm machinery displays; Queen of the Furrow competition; team plowing and - a crowd favourite - VIP plowing. This class features VIP guests from around the county trying their hand at plowing. There will also be the traditional horse-pulled plow class

in addition to the antique and modern plow competition.

The match will be held at 6024 Williams Street in Lucan. Registration is from 9 to 9:45 am while the plowing starts at 10 am and runs until 2:00 pm. The Queen of the Furrow plowing starts at 2:00 pm. A banquet and awards event will start at 5 pm at the Lucan Community Memorial Centre.

For more information contact association president Richard Elliott or association secretary Donna Elliott at 519-245-6473.

Chicken spat heads to tribunal

A chicken marketing board and processors is heading to a hearing before the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food Appeal Tribunal.

The tribunal has posted scant information on its website, saying only that the hearing will be Sept. 21 and 22.

The Association of Ontario

Chicken Processors has long tried to corner the market on all the chicken the national agency allows the Chicken Farmers of Ontario to produce.

Recently the Ontario board called for expressions of interest from farmers who own no chicken quota, but are interested in producing up to 3,000 birds a year for specialty markets.

Russia arrests cheese frauds

Russia has arrested six people accused of making cheeses that they fraudulently sold as desirable brands from Europe. They imported rennet and then put on

European-brand labels. Russia has banned imports of many European foods after Europe imposed economic sanctions over the civil war in the Ukraine.

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