

Rockwood woman offers equine program for first responders and military personnel

BY JAIME MYSLIK
ROCKWOOD – “The horses don’t judge, when I say this I don’t mean this in an unkind way, they don’t care who you are,” said Anne Porteous, owner of Sierra Acres Equine Assisted Healing Centre in Rockwood. “They don’t care if you’re a doctor, they just don’t care. “You’re a human.”
Porteous, an Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) certified facilitator, uses horses in equine assisted learning and therapy. She has been doing so at her Rockwood farm for the last five years.

During the sessions, whether equine-assisted psychotherapy or learning, the client never rides the horses, the interaction is always from the ground and the horse is free roam in the arena. “I’ve come to appreciate... this whole prey/predator relationship and how much trust they put in us to do what we want them to,” Porteous said. “But the thing in the work that I do is the feedback is automatic because if a horse does not understand what you’re asking, because let’s say I was doing leadership ... if you’re not leading them, you might think you’re leading them but in fact you’re

not really paying any attention, they don’t go, they simply don’t go.”
Porteous has 43 years of experience in nursing but about 12 years ago she and her husband decided to buy some property so they could have horses more permanently in their lives.

“The horse will say ‘okay that didn’t kill me, I’ll go back to what I’m doing.’”
- ANNE PORTEOUS

“I teach nursing now, I have for the last 17 years so I was looking for a way to marry that ... with something with horses,” she said. “And then started looking at various programs that used horses in various ways and found the EAGALA program ... and I went for one of their trainings and just kept pursuing it from there.”
That pursuit eventually took her to the Heroes Equine Learning Program (HELP). The EAGALA-model program is aimed at first responders, whether that be military, police, fire, corrections, EMS or 911-dispatchers who are affected by

post-traumatic stress and/or operational stress injuries. “This program is not intended as therapy,” the HELP website states. “Building a relationship between the participant and the horse allows problem solving, solution development and effective and valuable methods for healing.”
Sierra Acres is one of five centres in Ontario offering the program and the three to four-day retreat is fully funded. “The whole intent of this program is to give them some tools to help manage and deescalate some of the responses that they’re having to the trauma that they’ve experienced,” she explained. “You can’t undo it but you can certainly learn how to better manage it and that’s the intent of the program.”
Porteous explained that horses help the participants learn how they can better manage some of the “trig-



Anne Porteous is the owner of Sierra Acres Equine Assisted Healing Centre in Rockwood. She offers equine assisted psychotherapy and learning with her seven horses including Charlie. She also offers the Heroes Equine Learning Program (HELP). Photo by Jaime Myslik

gers” they’re experiencing. Porteous said it’s a horse’s hyper vigilance that uniquely suits them for work with first responders and military personnel. “They get watching for the predator, similar to say the military watching for the enemy,” she said. “It’s very symbiotic, right, that they understand that but horses can show you that you don’t have to be that way all the time.”
“Most people with trauma it’s sort of stuck in their brain ... So horses get that but the thing that’s different is the horse will say ‘okay that didn’t kill me, I’ll go back to what I’m doing.’”
“Whereas as humans we get stuck in that.”
Though she is a HELP centre Porteous said she has yet to run the program. “Whether it’s HELP or the (other) programs that I offer, the biggest challenge is the stigma attached,” she said.
Being a nurse Porteous said she understands the mentality that first responders and military personnel think they should shake off trauma, stay tough and move onto the next problem. Showing emotion is not encouraged.
“Unfortunately, it’s just a

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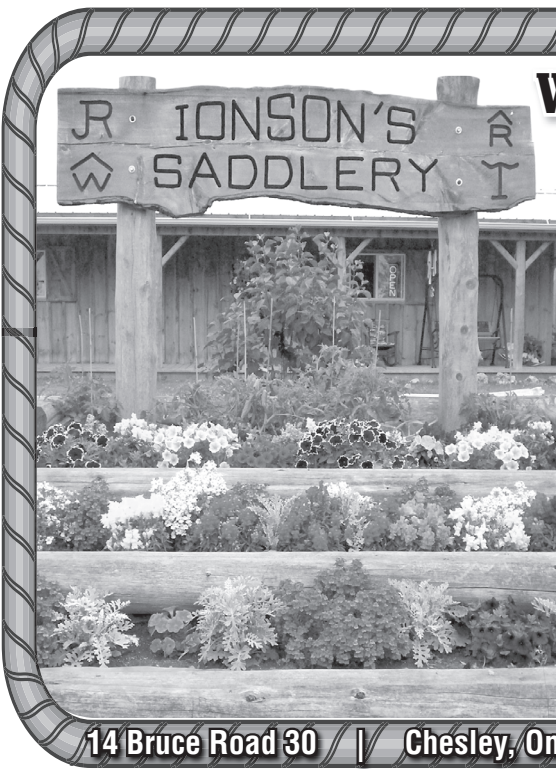
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The horses at Sierra Acres enjoy a summer breakfast. Photo by Jaime Myslik

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Horses used for ground therapy

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hard thing to get past,” she said. “We don’t want to be seen as weak because that’s not our persona.

“As much as we know and we think that it’s a needed, service people are still somewhat, I guess, reluctant to access it because ... they’re shown as being weak.”

To learn more about the HELP program visit help-psd.com/help.

Porteous has six horses she uses in her assisted psychotherapy and learning sessions with a four-year-old horse in training. She said that it doesn’t take a special type of horse to do the work she asks of them but she does work to desensitize them using tools like hula hoops, a ball and cracking a water bottle.

Each of the horses participates in her work.

“Each of them has a different personality and each of them has a different set of skills that they bring to the relationship,” Porteous said, adding that she has horses who need to be reminded of their boundaries often used with clients who have trouble setting boundaries and a horse who is strong and powerful but will back off when a client who is maybe being bullied brings up their energy and shows their power.

“They each have a different role to play,” Porteous said. “Typically I let clients choose the horse they want to work with because usually there’s some reason the person’s attracted to that particular horse.

Porteous works with a variety of clients from children who have autism to adults with Alzheimer’s disease and thesis students to corporate retreats.

While clients are welcome to come for just one session Porteous suggests at least three to five.

“The first session is kind of getting an idea of what their story is, what it is that they want to accomplish and how we might go about that,” she said.

For more information about Sierra Acres visit sierracres.ca and to learn about EGALA contact Porteous at anneporteous@sympatico.ca.



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