

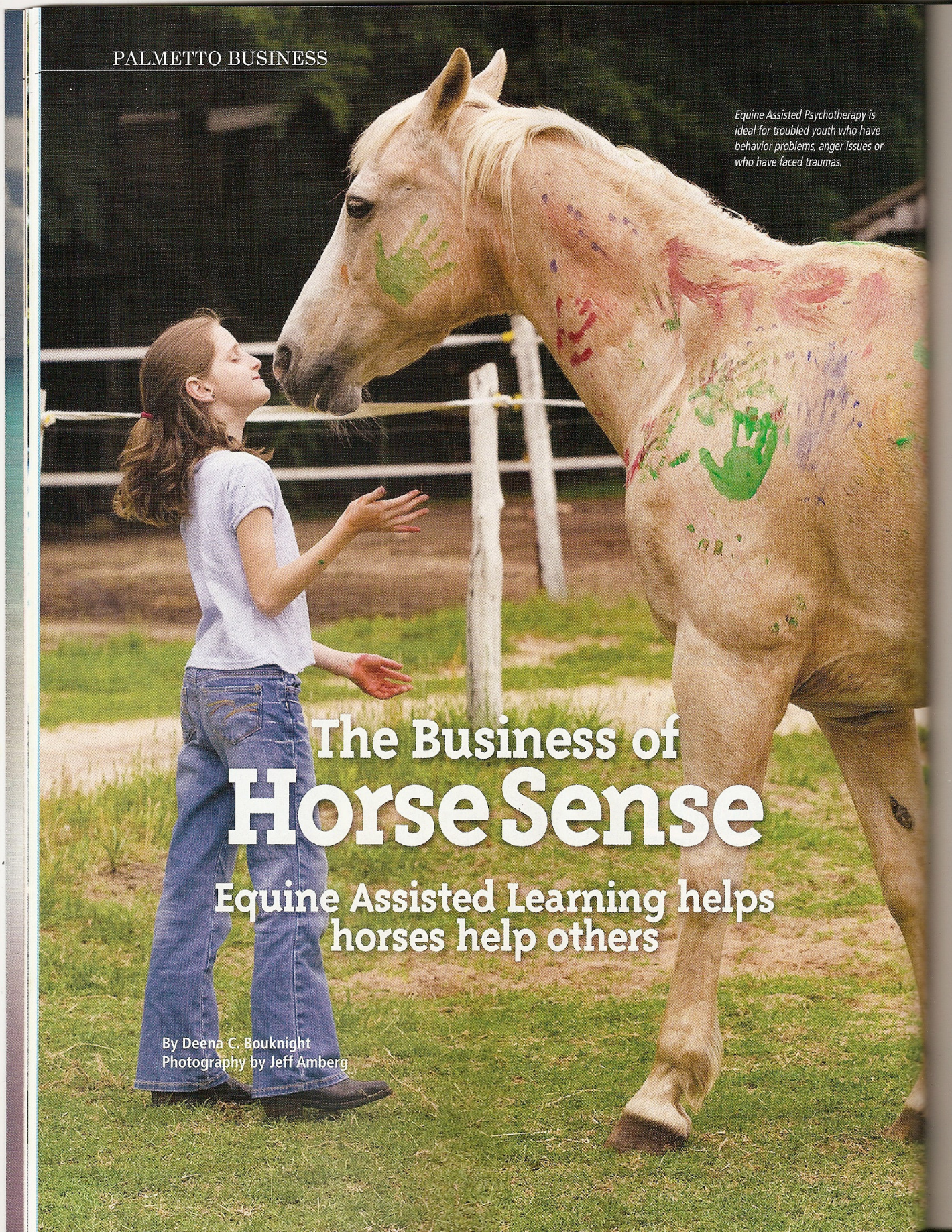
PALMETTO BUSINESS

Equine Assisted Psychotherapy is ideal for troubled youth who have behavior problems, anger issues or who have faced traumas.

The Business of Horse Sense

Equine Assisted Learning helps
horses help others

By Deena C. Bouknight
Photography by Jeff Amberg



Before the invention of the automobile, horses were necessities for many people. They served as the main mode of transportation and provided farming assistance. In this modern era, however, many view them simply as pretty pasture ornaments, while equestrians enjoy them recreationally. But in recent years, horses have begun filling a more noteworthy purpose.

Winston Churchill said, "There is something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man," showing he apparently recognized horse sense. Contrary to what some may think, horses are not just big, dumb, grass-ingesting animals. They are prey animals and are constantly aware of the environment around them, and because they respond to safety, comfort, trust and respect issues, horses are proving to be therapeutic in countless scenarios.

In fact, horse sense has been given a name: Equine Assisted Learning (EAL). Stephanie Bowman, a licensed professional counselor in Columbia, was so enthralled with what she experienced when she was introduced to it in 2006 that she became certified with the EAGALA (Equine Assistance Growth and Learning Association) as a mental health specialist. Seeing people who are unaccustomed to being around horses interacting and problem-solving with one another in a dynamic way led her to start her company, Turning Point Equine Assisted Services.

Stephanie teamed up with Julie McCrary, an EAGALA certified equine specialist whose nonprofit, F.A.I.T.H. (Fostering Achievement & Inspiration Through Horses), has similar goals. Both women have prior experience with horses.

"We live in a world in which stress is high and demand for performance is even higher," points out Stephanie. "Effective leadership and team dynamics are no longer nice theoretical concepts. They are essential for business success."

By working with groups of professionals in a variety of fields, Stephanie's goal is to use horses to help consultants, educators, law enforcement officers and others learn new ways of

thinking and solving problems. "In various team building activities, the natural feedback from the horses is integrated with the skills of the facilitators to provide insight and awareness of team dynamics," she explains. "Using horses may tell you more about yourself and your team in five minutes than you could learn in a month or more of meetings at your office."

Recently, a group of healthcare professionals met with Stephanie and Julie for a workshop at Folly Farms in Blythewood. Nearby was a corral with three horses: an old gelding, a rescue horse that was formerly abused and another younger gelding. Inside the ring were obstacles such as cones, poles, a tarp and a low jump. The group, which consisted of professional counselors and graduate students in counseling, had little to no experience with horses.

The goal for one particular task was for the group to work together to get each of the three horses through the obstacle course without touching the horses with any part of their bodies. Their only tool was a handful of long ribbons.

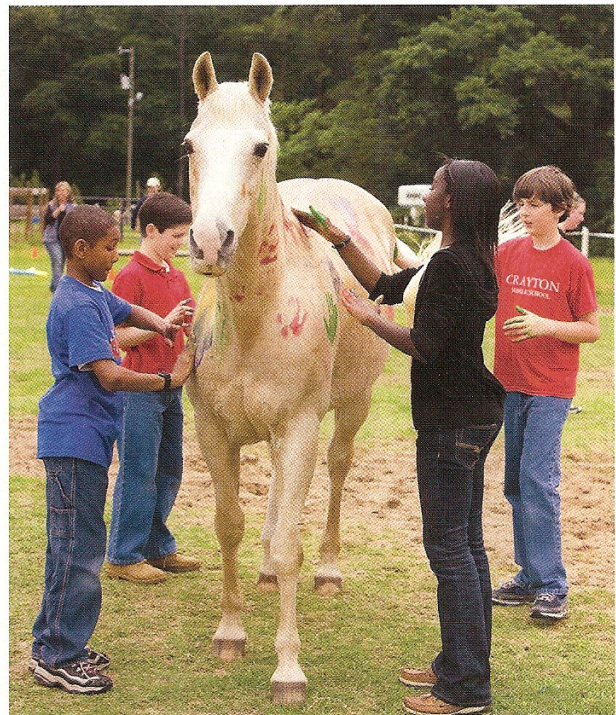
After many attempts, someone suggested they drape the ribbon over the horse's neck – without touching it with their hands – and pull on the ribbon to lead the horse one by one through the course without difficulty. Clapping, cheering and praise for the horses followed once the last horse was led through the course.

The group agreed that they learned skills in problem solving, encouragement, conquering uncertainty and communication during the exercise with the horses. They expressed a feeling of accomplishment, a bonding with the horses and a satisfaction with working out issues in a group setting.

"The success is measured in what

they got out of it," says Stephanie, "not what they got the horses to do." She adds, "Horses are ideal in these situations because they are social animals who have a distinct hierarchy of roles, and they give immediate feedback to the people who are working with them. People, also, assume different roles when they interact with the horses. The horses are good at setting boundaries and responding to leadership. They respond to being asked to do things ... to the relationship that is formed."

Besides team building, Turning Point also offers Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) to address such issues as conflict resolution, behavior problems, anger



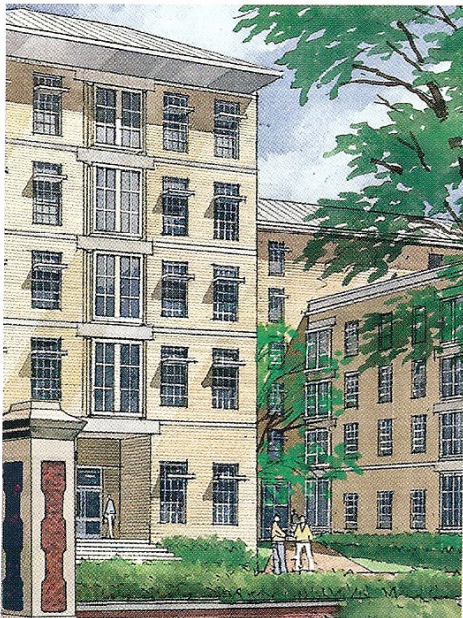
In this activity, kids dip their hands in paint and decorate a horse with illustrations of an assigned theme.

issues, assertiveness, trauma, grief, loss and boundaries. "It's ideal for troubled youth, adolescents who have faced traumas, veterans, orphans and abused women," says Julie. "Horses give you immediate feedback, but are non-judgmental."

She adds, "Troubled youth, especially, are given so many rules. This is a chance for them to figure some things out for themselves, to learn self-discovery and build confidence."

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One activity that youth enjoy with the horses is what Stephanie calls "Horse Art." The kids dip their hands in several colors of paint and decorate a horse with illustrations of an assigned theme, such as "friendship."

"With the theme of 'friendship,' we tell the kids to paint a picture, use words or otherwise illustrate how their best friends make them feel or qualities they want in someone who is a very good friend," explains Stephanie.

Of course, Stephanie and Julie do look at what the children choose to paint on the horse. More importantly, they observe how the participants connect or respond to the horse's actions.

"With one group, the horse had her head raised and seemed uncomfortable at one point," says Stephanie. "We watched to see if the kids noticed the horse's behavior. If so, we would ask them how they interpreted this behavior." The women would then observe the children's answers to these questions and help the kids draw conclusions about their own relationships from the answers that they had given.

EAP provides the opportunity to apply what is learned with the horses to other areas of life. "For some, the mere size and power of the horse sets the stage for overcoming fears and developing confidence to work through challenging situations," Stephanie says. "Horses have an uncanny ability to illuminate who we are and where we need to go. People often don't learn new things unless they're challenged – when they are stretched beyond their comfort zone. Some of the deepest and most lasting changes occur when people find their own answers to problems that they face. Interacting with the horses can help them discover these answers. Horses can touch deep recesses in us that are inaccessible to most people, regions people are afraid to address – this is where horse sense touches the human heart."

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