

Gaston ranch using horses to help troubled children

[Michael Barrett](#)

2011-10-10 18:48:10



Trust is a two-way street, and that phrase is no less true in the relationship between humans and horses.

“What a lot of people don’t realize is horses are incredibly emotional animals,” said Wendy Stokes, co-founder and operator of Bit of Hope Ranch in Gaston County. “They pick up on things. If you are scared, they think, ‘Oh my goodness, I need to be scared.’”

So when a child who has been physically or emotionally abused can establish a relationship with an equine, it’s a special and rewarding bond that has broad benefits.

“The kids we work with have to learn to trust again,” said Stokes. “And there’s something powerful about being able to work with a horse. If you can trust, you can build hope.”

Stokes and her business partner, Meg Vanderbilt, established their nonprofit on 45 acres of land south of Gastonia in October 2008. Three years in, they’re still working to raise their profile, while celebrating the strides that have already been made with local children who need a reason to believe in life.

On Saturday night, Bit of Hope Ranch will host its second annual Blue Jean Ball fundraiser, with a \$25-a-plate barbecue dinner expected to draw 250 guest. It will include demonstrations of the programs that take place there, along with line dancing, a bonfire pit and other entertainment.

Children who are referred to the ranch are not charged any fees for the services they receive. So the ball — along with a Run for the Money fundraiser the ranch benefits from each year — serves as a critical source of financial support, Stokes said.

Faith-based foundation

At nonprofits such as Shining Hope Farms in Mount Holly, therapeutic horseback riding has become a popular and well-known method for treating children and adults with disabilities.

Bit of Hope Ranch uses the same benefits of interacting and working with horses to aid troubled children and teenagers who have been abandoned, or sexually, mentally or physically abused.

“We reach a completely different group,” Stokes said.

Stokes and Vanderbilt are both longtime horse lovers and instructors who long had a dream of establishing a nonprofit ranch to benefit others. Stokes’ vision materialized further when she read a book about Crystal Peaks Youth Ranch in Oregon, and she soon attended a clinic there that explained the operation’s mission. It has become the inspiration for the ranch here.

“We’re modeling ourselves on them,” she said.

Not long after that trip, Stokes and Vanderbilt connected with a benefactor who purchased the 45-acre farm off CR Wood Road and put it into a trust. The faith-based nonprofit now has 15 regular horses, two miniature horses, dogs and a slew of other smaller farm animals that are used in the organization’s work.

Most of the horses were either donated to the group or were abused horses that were acquired and rehabilitated to work with children.

“It’s a dream to be living this every day,” said Stokes. “It’s an honor and a privilege to be able to go out and watch the kids blossom when they interact with the horses.”

Unconditional love

Children who come to the ranch each weekday are referred through schools, churches and organizations such as Beacon Hall and the Gaston Adolescence Center. The ranch often serves as many as 75 children a week, for an hour to an hour and a half each. Volunteers and mentors are critical to making things run smoothly, Stokes said.

Children who suffer from issues such as anger, low self-confidence and relationship problems are introduced to the horses. They’re given ranch chores with a goal of teaching responsibility and work ethic. Part of their time is spent working directly with a horse and learning skills such as grooming, saddling and riding.

“We give them a life skill to focus on every week, such as trust, courage and determination,” said Stokes. “We talk about that life skill and incorporate it into their work with the horses.

“None of us ever outgrow the feeling of accomplishment. If we can help them with that, helps with their development.

Other events are held as well. Once a month, Family Ranch Night allows the children to come out to the ranch with their families.

Bit of Hope Ranch is the only nonprofit providing its specific brand of services in the Charlotte area, Stokes said. She hopes to help more people learn about the good of what they do, so they can expand their influence.

“A horse will offer unconditional love to a child,” she said. “They don’t care if you have the latest brand of jeans or tennis shoes on. They have that sense of about them. They want to take care of kids.”

You can reach Michael Barrett at 704-869-1826.

© Copyright 2011 Freedom Communications. All Rights Reserved.
[Privacy Policy](#) | [User Agreement](#) | [Site](#)