Nonprofit organizations throughout Asheville and the surrounding area nourish the people within our communities, caring for those in need, protecting our historic heritage, educating young and old, and nurturing our cultural soul. Each month, The Laurel brings you some of the stories behind these agencies.

For over 6,000 years, the horse—a magnificent animal of power, freedom and grace—has bestowed its gifts upon humans, granting expanded capacities to modify landscapes and cultures the world over. While historically used in combat, conquest, and cultivation, the horse has more subtle abilities as well: to heal inner landscapes and foster healthy relationships.

Joining with horses in this effort to heal is Heart of Horse Sense, an organization in Madison County that offers equine assisted psychotherapy and learning (EAP/EAL).

“Equine assisted psychotherapy is more than a horse and a curry comb,” says Shannon Knapp, the organization’s founder and director. “Licensed programs include a mental health professional, as well as a horse professional keyed into the psychology and body language of horses. Both receive specific training in trauma-related issues.”

When a client enters an EAP program they are paired with a horse for a given length time, from one outing to a series. Depending on the needs of both, the client begins to make requests of the horse.

Horses have a unique capacity to mirror what is hidden. So a client receives immediate feedback, both on the external quality of the request as well as the more subtle internal behaviors and unconscious feelings that may be harder to acknowledge.

If the request was made as a demand, the horse may resist; if made in a noncommittal fashion, the horse may ignore. As the client develops skills in nonverbal communication, teamwork, and leadership, the horse builds trust and begins to connect with the request. Through this process, clients reorganize their habits while also developing the ability to dial their inner volume up or down as needed. They learn how to both hear and be heard.

Such skills are essential for positive relationships, but for those who have suffered from trauma, they can be foreign. In trauma, internal processes associated with long-term care (for example the “thinking brain”), shut down. Relating comes from the fight, flee, or freeze response, which may not go away on its own or may get worse over time.

Military veterans suffer disproportionately from this kind of “trauma brain.” According to the Veterans Association, 30% of vets are diagnosed with PTSD. Youth living in sustained poverty and violence can experience a similar trauma.

Heart of Horse Sense focuses specifically on these two populations. “A veteran may discover that communication hardwired for combat doesn’t work with horses or their families,” says Shannon. “And at-risk-youth may learn self-regulation skills that keep them out of youth development facilities.”

“Horses are prey animals whose brains are also focused on survival,” she says. “When horse and client come together to connect, both must move from their “trauma brains” into their “thinking brains.” They start to forge a relationship built on the mutual satisfaction of met needs, rather than one of force, fear, and intimidation.” Almost all of the horses here are only too familiar with the latter, most being rescue animals.

Jake LaRue, volunteer at Heart of Horse Sense and Marine Corps vet who served in the Persian Gulf War and in Somalia, puts it this way, “When I get the horse, and the horse gets me, it’s inspirational.”

Heart of Horse Sense is currently seeking “Angels” to sponsor horses, vets, and at-risk-youth. They are also requesting art for their fall Art Auction Fundraiser. For more information about the organization and about a public tour on June 28, visit heartofhorsesense.org.

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