PAL-O-MINE EQUESTRIAN: HARNESSING THE HEALING POWER OF HORSES

9/11/2019

Be an Encourager - The World has enough critics

The mission of Pal-O-Mine Equestrian is to provide a comprehensive therapeutic equine program using horses to facilitate growth, learning, and healing. Their population includes children and adults with disabilities, those who have been abused or neglected, the military and the economically compromised.

A Safe, Peaceful Place
The overwhelming sense we had when visiting Pal-O-Mine Equestrian last spring was peace. Peace and love and deep, deep commitment to serving the folks of diverse needs who come to learn and receive therapy. They say the word “miracle” comes up a lot. We’re not surprised.

“It doesn't even smell like a farm!” said one woman, who is admittedly not always comfortable with animals, “I come from an extraordinarily stressful line of work. I feel my blood pressure going down here. This place is so calming.”

“It feels safe,” remarked another, “I feel safety, love and kindness.”

The farm is kept very clean. It is beautiful. There are inspirational messages and generously donated art on virtually every wall. The animals are carefully chosen to be calm, forgiving and tolerant. Each client is carefully matched with a trained professional attuned to their individual needs and an equine specialist who carefully minds the horses throughout each encounter. The multitude of therapists regularly consult with each other. All are required to participate in continuing education on a yearly basis. The volunteer training is rigorous as well.

“Like the horses, roughly one in ten of our volunteers makes it through the trial period,” notes Founder and CEO Lisa Gatti, “It's not that there’s anything wrong
with them as people or as animals. It's just that they have to be a perfect fit to meet our very special needs.”

We're going try to put this down in writing, but Lisa is right about another thing, too: You can admire Pal-O-Mine Equestrian from afar. To really feel it in person, though, is beyond words.

Some people do speak for the first time here. Others learn to walk. Many overcome trauma and other challenges, learning to make the best of what they have and how to better interact with the world around them. People come here and learn to be productive, contributing members of society. Many dare – sometimes for the first time ever – to dream.

This whole place is a dream, manifested as a 25 horse, 13-acre farm serving 400 individuals weekly. There are sheep, chickens, one cat, a rabbit and other animals. There are 8 full-time and 35-40 part time staff of various specialties, as well as eighty regular volunteers and another 40 or 50 who come in to help with events.

There's a large organic garden, as well as unique classrooms and workshops, including a kitchen.

Mostly though, Pal-O-Mine Equestrian is about the horses and their power to heal.

The Power of Pop Fiction
Lisa Gatti grew up riding horses. Her mother was in Special Education and she always knew she wanted to be a teacher, too. She didn’t put two and two together, though, until she came across – of all things – a romance novel.

“My father was in book publishing. He was very strict,” recalls Lisa Gatti, “When I was in college he used to send me piles of books to read on the weekends, trying to keep me in line.”

“I obeyed him one Friday,” she smiles, “though it was a book my dad’s secretary
had tucked in there that I actually picked up.”

_Palomino_, by Danielle Steel, is about a woman who fell off a horse and opened a ranch for kids with disabilities.

“It changed my life. I called my dad at 2am. He asked me if I’d been drinking,” she laughs, “No! He told me to go to bed.”

The next morning she called him again. He told her that if she still felt this way after finishing her sophomore year of college, he’d consider letting her transfer.

“I was a good kid,” she smiles, “So I did just that.”

She loved helping at-risk youth. Her first teaching job was at an alternative high school for youth who were labeled “emotionally disturbed” and “juvenile delinquents.” They were just kids to Lisa; kids who were not as fortunate to have great parents like she did. Lisa used horses to teach them about punctuality, compassion, empathy, responsibility and respect.

These same kids were her very first volunteers when she founded Pal-O-Mine. It was at this point that Lisa began to learn the harsh realities of the world; facing discrimination and the like against both the kinds of kids and the program that she was trying to grow.

“I moved six times between 1994 and 2004,” she remembers. “Then, in 2007, I found a bank who was willing to make the loan I needed to purchase our own property, empowering us to grow into what we’ve become today.”

Lisa doesn’t need an alarm clock because she has such an extraordinarily motivating reason to wake up every morning. Still, she’s very clear that what she does isn’t for everyone. It’s really hard work and, despite all the success of this highly positive environment she’s fostered, there are still tremendous challenges and people who don’t value what they do or the people whom they serve. She shrugs. There are still plenty of bright spots.

“My first grant actually came from Danielle Steel! We needed $8,000 to get three kids to a competition in Illinois. They were living with me at the time. When the check came, I couldn’t believe it when I saw her return address on the envelope. I was even more excited to get a letter from Danielle Steel than I was about the money.”

“She didn’t write a word! It was just a check! But that check provided the opportunity for one of Pal-O-Mine’s students to win at the competition.”
Maybe one day Danielle Steel will inquire more deeply. After all, she’s inspired a heck of a story: A huge, heroic journey that’s been one wonderful, challenging test of perseverance and strength after another, filled with miraculous transformations.

Just the Right Horses
Gatti is clear: This is not an animal rescue operation. Each horse goes through a 3-month trial period. Lisa will explain to you that it’s not about the breed of horse, either. They have many, many breeds. What matters is their health and personalities. They have to be sound with a steady gait. Their ears and eyes need to be in good condition. Mostly, though, they have to be forgiving and tolerant.

“Some of these kids have really serious issues,” Lisa explains. If a horse is unsteady, that can be a serious problem. If a horse is not exceptionally patient and willing to tolerate unusual conditions and occasional outbursts, that could be disastrous.

They are very mindful, also, that horses are horses and there are things you can’t train. Hand-fed horses are no good. “They become mouthy,” explains Lisa, “and we can’t discipline it out of them.”

“We do so much boundary work with kids who are traumatized. We are trying to teach them respect and we need horses who can help with that.”

“Imagine,” she continues, “a huge, 2,000 pound animal coming over just because it wants to be near you. That has HUGE impact because these horses don’t want food, just companionship. Often, this is the first time these kids have experienced that.”

The environments are carefully constructed. The center aisle of the barn, for example, is very wide and paved. This is to accommodate wheelchairs. It also means that the horses can only be tied off on one side of their heads, which is a fairly unusual arrangement. Whether or not the horse can adapt to that is generally one of the first tests of an animal’s suitability to the job.

“Roughly 1 in 10 horses ultimately make it,” says Lisa.
She leads us over to Miniature Sicilian Donkeys who sometimes pull wagons, “These are great for those who can’t ride due to their frailty, weight or fear. Their personalities help, too. They are strong and stubborn – perfect for leadership development!”

“Then, there are our ‘Celebrity Chickens’,,” she smiles, “Lady Gaga, Ginger Rogers, Dolly Parton and Elton John. They’ve all been raised here and they’re very friendly!”

Cajun
Now, just because this isn’t a rescue operation, doesn’t mean there aren’t animals with stories. An Appaloosa named Cajun is a prime example. He actually was a rescue, from Hurricane Katrina.

“When he came he was wild-eyed,” remembers Lisa, “There were only three of us who could ride him for the first six months.”

In his past life, he’d been a rodeo horse. Lisa points to a large scar on Cajun’s side where he was once gored by a bull. Then that huge hurricane hit and he became homeless. On top of all of this, he’d been at Pal-O-Mine for two years when they discovered a huge mass.

“This horse is a cancer SURVIVOR. It turns out he’s great at connecting with kids who are survivors, too.”

Lisa talks a bit about how gentle he is with trauma-inflicted and adjudicated youth. “He’s super sensitive,” she says, “He just knows.”

Then she starts talking about our own massive superstorm Sandy. They had to evacuate the horses and move them to the front field. Lisa and the two others with her had no other choice but to let all the horses go and hope for the best.

“Then I saw Cajun,” she says, still looking somewhat incredulous, “He seemed to know just what to do. He lined up all the horses in formation, and took care of them all. He was the calm in the storm, keeping the whole team together.”
While the story still amazes her, she sees it in him every day, “Cajun seems to know instinctively who is the most fragile, and he tends to them.”

Goliath

Goliath lives up to his name. An enormous Belgium Draft Horse, he came from New Hampshire where he was bred to be a competitive pulling horse that lugs thousands of pounds of cement. He wasn’t aggressive enough, though. They tried using electric prodders to get him to pull up his feet, and he ignored them.

“This was bad for them, but good for us. So we got him!”

He requires a little bit of extra TLC. Since his tail had been docked for his previous job, he has a weave that they replace three times a year so he can brush off the flies.

“It’s expensive, but he’s worth it.”

The folks at Pal-O-Mine kept in touch with the farm Goliath came from, which is reputable. Those folks loved where he ended up, and before they cut off the tail of another horse that didn’t suit their needs they inquired with Pal-O-Mine to see if they wanted him, too.

“They have very different personalities,” notes Lisa. One will allow 25 kids to paint and crawl all over him. The other is too overly cautious. One is great for shows, the other just isn’t into it. They’re both really good for clients who have trouble with neck and trunk control, who require a second rider behind them.

She smiles, thinking that one doesn’t have to have special needs to have something to learn from the horses. She recalls a story of folks who wanted to do emergency training with them. They thought they knew what to do, and resisted assistance from the trainers. After 20 minutes of trying brute force, they finally asked, “Will you teach me?”

The folks at Pal-O-Mine proceeded to show them better ways to move a 2400 pound Goliath.

Just the Right Facilities

Lisa points to a small building, showing that the farm is not without classrooms. Still, they’re a little bit different, “Many of our kids are totally disengaged from the
learning process. They have trouble with a traditional classroom setting.”

The saddle pads and hay bales in the Pal-O-Mine classroom are hard to throw around the room. While there are books and other learning supplies, these spaces lack the trappings and formal feel that some kids have painful associations with. Plus, the animals can come in. They help.

A perimeter track known as “The Trail” traces the property. It serves kids with disabilities who may benefit from the terrain and the Green Belt that backs up to the Pal-O-Mine property, but who cannot travel far due to medical issues or behaviors. Some examples of such students include kids who are prone to seizures or who have obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Along The Trail are little mailboxes in the shape of bird houses that were specially crafted by Eagle Scouts and the troops they led. Each contain small manipulatives that are used as sensory training tools. Many peer-to-peer activities also occur here.

The students engage with all sorts of animals, as well as things like letter magnets, a water wall, and a basketball hoop. There’s a lot of focus on learning to share and to take turns as they ride.

“It’s really social,” explains Lisa, “They practice a lot of expressive and receptive language. Most importantly, for a lot of these kids, it’s the first time they ever get to feel like their typically able peers.”

She goes on, pointing out details that physical and occupational therapists find important, such as the different surfaces – cement, dirt, rubber – that their patients can learn to navigate. She expresses gratitude for a Bethpage FCU funded sidewalk, and points out connection paths between parts of the property.
Just the Right Staff

Pal-O-Mine serves individuals ages 18 months to over 70 years of age. They have worked with several school districts over the years, including Half Hollow Hills, Bethpage/Plainview, Central Islip, Nassau and Eastern Suffolk BOCES, Bayport/Bluepoint and Copaque. They have programs for individuals with various physical disabilities, as well as with social and emotional challenges, including neglect, abuse and poverty. They offer alternatives to incarceration, as well as programs for adjudicated youth, veterans and corporate workshops.

All this requires careful planning and staffing. Pal-O-Mine maintains a 1 to 1 staff to student ratio, employing diverse professionals who work together. These staff members each stay within the scope of their practice, teaching and treating those individuals whom they are most qualified to work with. Then there are those who specialize in the horses. Several staff members live on the property.

Much is done to maintain the integrity of this model. Continuing education is mandated for all Pal-O-Mine staff. There is rigorous training for volunteers as well, who are carefully selected for their attentiveness, focus and commitment. It's emphasized repeatedly: As with the horses, everyone who is part of the Pal-O-Mine team, staff, interns, volunteers, EVERYONE is held to very high standards and a very strict code of conduct.

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With the school district programs, they specialize in teaching common core in uncommon ways. Throughout, lesson plans are structured, yet very flexible. Generally, when a client comes in there will be three well-crafted options available. Depending on how the client is that day will determine which one is followed. There are takeaway and processing activities, allowing Pal-O-Mine teaching to go back to the classroom with its kids. There is tremendous focus on continuity and routine.

Lisa talks of incredible successes they’ve had – the word “miracles” comes up again – and visits from Superintendents and other administrators who would like to add more classes. She is also very proud of their community partnerships.

“We have had lots of Eagle Scouts completing their projects here.”

Still, the primary focus is the horses. “Horses move people,” says Lisa, “I’ve learned that my job is to shut up and let the horse do the work.”

She gives the example of a horse and a woman, emphasizing again that horses display an innate ability to read people, with their behaviors mirroring what is going on within. This particular woman was stuck in an abusive relationship. Session after session, the horse would nudge the woman and block her path, until one day, the horse bit her. That day, it turns out, saved this woman’s life!

“It was in that moment that she realized she had to DO something,” explains Lisa, “It was in that moment, she realized that she had the choice to DO something. She left her abuser and never looked back. It was, literally, a break-through.”

This is not to suggest that folks are at all left alone with the horses. Lisa chooses to follow the EAGALA model, where there is at least one mental health therapist and an equine specialist always in the arena with the client. It is a solutions-oriented model, based on the premise that every client has his/her own answers. The focus is all about the experiential process, and there is never a right or a wrong. She notes again that therapists are carefully matched and that they consult regularly with each other. With grief and trauma, therapists remain vigilantly connected, guiding the process when things come up.

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Mine team, staff, interns, volunteers, EVERYONE is held to very high standards and a very strict code of conduct.

“It’s all about safety,” says Lisa, “physical and emotional safety – for our clients, for our livestock and for each other.”

Unique Work and Continuing Education Program
Lisa takes us down one of the connecting paths to another part of the property where there’s a greenhouse, some gardens, pastures and another building. She explains that some of the students have been with Pal-O-Mine since they started in 1995. The question had long come up,

“Now what?”

Yes, there are many other programs available for adults with disabilities, but these folks wanted more Pal-O-Mine and less discrimination. Eight years ago, Pal-O-Mine crafted a special offering.

“What we do here is different from ‘Dayhab,’” explains Lisa, “It’s basically a paid internship vocational program that runs 5 days per week for people with disabilities who are 18 years or older. Keeping consistent with Pal-O-Mine’s policy, each intern comes in on a three month trial. It is after this three month trial, they are eligible for a stipend. Besides the organic farming and recycling classes, each intern learns the foundations of work. Examples of this include how to punch in using a time clock, how to put in for vacation and personal days, as well as learning to balance a checkbook, do a load of laundry or cook a meal.

The program has become sustainable. There are 40 interns with various disabilities participating. They sustain the program by creating and crafting their own unique items and then contracting with larger organizations, as well as with some upscale east end shops to sell their unique crafts on consignment. They’ve made shoe racks and frames. They were recently contracted to make centerpieces
for a golf outing. The project we saw them working on was one that's very special to the group: key chains.

One of Pal-O-Mine's students, a young man named Henry, had an idea, "What if we look up the colors for Cerebral Palsy (his disability), and make horseshoe keychains in those colors?"

He looked it up. Then, his fellows looked up the colors associated with their conditions - Down Syndrome, Autism...they thought of veterans and people who are survivors of breast cancer. Someone remembered animal abuse. A signature project was born!

The keychain making process is something of an assembly line, with students gathered around the table working together to decorate metal horseshoes with colored wire and beads. The finished products sell for $15 in the Pal-o-Mine office and elsewhere. Recently they made 100 for the Make a Wish Foundation.

There is also a working kitchen. Other ideas are developing, including using their produce from the organic farm and cooking with it. They are thinking about ways to incorporate creative recycling as well. There are plans to build and maintain a sensory garden, and for a roadside farm stand.

Parents talk about what a life changing place it is, how their adult children learn to balance a checkbook and to feel productive. The main objective is to enable folks with many different disabilities to work together, meaningfully, and even to give back to the community.

Humble, Yet Strong and Ready to Grow
There will always be challenges. The rising cost of EVERYTHING because we live on Long Island is one, as well as other financial constraints, livestock concerns, government rulings and finding the perfect staff and volunteers for this ever growing program.

Despite these challenges, Pal-O-Mine has great reason for hope. They have tremendous confidence in their program and success rate. They are excited about their promising future.

Pal-O-Mine has always been very thrifty with its outreach, and has never had
professional marketing guidance. They have had no government funding to date. It wasn't until their 20th Anniversary that Pal-O-Mine even had its first open house. Mostly, that's because they don't want to exploit their populations.

“There are so many organizations and brands using veterans and other populations just because it is the ‘buzz word' of the year” says Lisa, “even when they mean well, it feels wrong. We are about real people and protecting their emotional safety. Yes, this is a business. However, first and foremost, this is about human beings.”

This is not to say that their success hasn't garnered some pretty big attention. They were featured on Oprah and The Today Show. They have definitely been grateful for that press. When the folks in our party were gathered around a table toward the end of our visit, they were asked why they support this organization and what makes it special. They came up with a list:

- Credibility. This organization is so professional, and deeply sincere.
- The 25-years experience proving that integrity
- I deeply value the way they take emotional safety and mental health very seriously
- I'm so impressed with the level of integration between the various specialists they have working here, giving a unique level of support to a client's often complicated and sensitive issues.
- The diversity of people served, and the diversity of staff that makes it possible
- The variety of programs and focus on both safety and individual needs is incredible. I am amazed at the level of thought that goes into every detail
- I am not a super-animal person. Frankly I'm afraid of them and I've never been much for farms. But this place is different. It doesn't smell. It's peaceful. I have an extraordinarily stressful job and I feel my blood pressure going down here. It's so calming
- It feels safe. I feel safety, love and kindness here.

_Pal-O-Mine is now embarking on their first-ever expansion campaign, “A Race We Will Win.” The $3M total project involves a broad range of items, ranging from building renovations, to major equipment, to helping secure care for the horses. One item they're excited to break ground on in September 2019 is an accessible sensory playground sponsored by The Andy Foundation. To see details regarding the other items, please visit this Pal-O-Mine webpage._

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Money is really important, but it’s not the only way to help! In order to realize this vision, Pal-O-Mine is required to communicate how much they have to offer and rally many volunteers. They are seeking influential folks to serve as ambassadors, and for others who will help as they can.

Are you interested? Support can be as simple as sharing this article, or as deep as becoming a major fundraiser for Pal-O-Mine Equestrian. The organization encourages all who care to please reach out the farm, learn more, and see what you might do together.

They greatly appreciate all the support that they can get.

Volunteers Elizabeth Hayes and Rachel Gearwar Photo Credit: Ellen Lear