

Horse as Healer - part 2

By Tony Hetman

This is the story of Cassie, a 15-year-old female who experiences autism, and how working with horses has dramatically changed her life.

At six years of age Cassie was diagnosed with autism. Her elementary school memories were not fond ones as she recalls being bullied because she was different. In her 15 years, she has moved three times, finally settling in the Okanagan with her parents.

Leann (Pitman) Manuel of Riding 4 Life Equine Enterprises, says, "I met Cassie when I first moved to the Okanagan in the summer of 2008 when she was just six or seven years old. She has been riding with me on and off ever since. I've watched her grow up in my barnyard in a way. She was my first Okanagan rider."

Autism has affected Cassie in many ways. Cassie says, "Autism makes it very difficult for me to learn because it is difficult to remember things, and my thinking and processing speed is very slow." She adds, "I find it difficult to focus when it's noisy, or if I'm moody."

Leann, reflecting back on Cassie at an earlier age, says, "Reading and math were very difficult for her. Making friends did not come easily either. I think she often felt sad, depressed, and overwhelmed." However, Cassie's life began to change when she started to work with horses. Leann observed, "At the same time she was still struggling to read basic sentences, she learned how to saddle her own horse."

Leann adds, "While the move to high school was extremely stressful with all of its social implications, Cassie was able to compete in horse shows and win ribbons and high points in divisions that included lifelong riders and horse owners."

Cassie is first to admit she likes working with her hands, including woodworking and mechanics, better than English or math. However, she did achieve 86 percent in English last year, which she says, "is one of my greatest accomplishments." Moreover, she is quite proud of the fact that she was awarded a first prize ribbon in her very first horse show when she was around twelve years of age. That ribbon was just one of several to be won over the next three years. When asked if she displays all of her ribbons she says, "I keep them in a box."

Cassie says, "I can't really imagine what my life would be like without horses. Some of the things horses have taught me are awareness, as they are a big animal and can trample you by accident. The (therapeutic riding) lessons have also helped me to focus better." Although I've never met Cassie before, I do know a bit about her history, and listening to her talk confidently makes me think her horse friends have played a major role in her development.

When queried if horses can talk to humans, she says, "They talk to us with body language. If they are angry they will pin their ears back. If their ears are straight up



Cassie with Herbie. Photo credit: Tony Hetman

they are relaxed and calm and it is safe to approach." According to Cassie, "horses are easier to talk to than humans."

Cassie provided some interesting feedback when asked, what makes her the happiest. She says, "Being with my friends makes me happiest of all. When I am in a joyful, talkative mood I like spending time with my friends. However, when I am non talkative I like being with horses because they are calming."

Cassie works Saturdays at Riding 4 Life where she cleans all the paddocks, fills the water troughs, and checks the chore list for other tasks. When Leann pays her for the work, Cassie often comments, "It feels wrong to get paid for something that I would want to do anyway."

Often she will catch Leann's show horse Quiggly, which is the most reactive horse at the school. According to a colleague of Leann's, Quiggly as a colt was said to be the most challenging temperament she had ever seen. Leann says, "Cassie's relaxed approach to Quiggly has been a huge factor in his development."

Leann adds, "Cassie saddles Quiggly, and rides him on her own with only very distant supervision from me now. She rides him on trail rides with our group—that usually includes a mix of experienced horse owners, other typical beginner riders on our lesson horses, and our instructors, and you'd be hard pressed to pick her out." It is Cassie's hard work that has enabled her to be the capable rider she is today. In fact, Leann says, "She can march my high-powered gelding (Quiggly) into the show ring and bring home her division high point (accumulation of points in a riding event grouped according by age or ability level)."

Since being with horses, Cassie has overcome, or at least learned to cope with, some major difficulties. While handling, riding, and competing with a horse, she

has to focus on the task at hand, for example, manoeuvring around barriers. Developing this concentration and focus with the horse has enabled her to transfer this skill to other tasks in her life. She is more at ease with having conversations, which has led to developing friendships, something that she lacked in earlier phases of her life. It has also helped with her schoolwork because she is better able to concentrate and solve problems. Moreover, winning awards at horse riding competitions has enhanced her self-esteem and confidence. Cassie's caring for the horses by grooming and cleaning their paddocks has also gained her a better understanding of horses and appreciation for hard manual work. The comfort she feels around horses often leads to comfort around people. For example, eye contact with a horse has helped her to feel easier about making eye contact with, and feeling more at ease around people.

Leann says, "I think her time with my horses has offered her a glimpse into her future and what she may want to do and is capable of as she becomes an adult. She often talks about owning her own horse some day and all the animals she'll have in her barn yard."

When asked what is special about horses, Cassie is quick to respond with an almost dry sense of humour: "they're not people."

Even Jonathan Swift knew of the intelligence of horses when he wrote of the Houyhnhnms in *Gulliver's Travels*. Perhaps one day we will all come to see the value of our four-legged friends in our travels.

Tony Hetman is an artisan, educator, and writer having published over 200 articles and technical documentations. He is a winner of three first prize awards for playwriting, and also had his plays produced by CBC.