

Horse as Healer

By Tony Hetman

As a four-year-old growing up on a farm, I had the opportunity to straddle – well, it was more like doing the splits – a beautiful chestnut draft horse used to work the land. I was also lucky enough to own a brown and white pinto saddle horse.

Today, the gentle spirit of the horse lives on in ways other than dragging a wagon or piece of machinery behind it, herding cattle, or competing in events. Horse Therapeutic Riding schools are now using horses to help people with physical and mental issues.

One such school is Riding 4 Life, located on Penticton's band land, and founded by Leann (Pitman) Manuel who is also one of the instructors. Her school offers basic riding lessons, ground work with horses, hippotherapy (a medically based treatment tool), and therapeutic horsemanship.

Leann's involvement with teaching basic riding lessons was about to change when a parent of a client visited the school. The parent was seeking an opportunity for some of the special needs children she was working with, as they enjoyed visiting the horses. Leann says, "Within just a few short months, the benefit for many of those [special needs] riders was very clear and led me to do some reading. I discovered that research and practice in the field of therapeutic riding was expanding to include, not only folks with primarily physical limitations, but also those with other challenges. The more I learned, the more my program gained recognition and I soon founded Riding 4 Life. That was over a decade ago now."

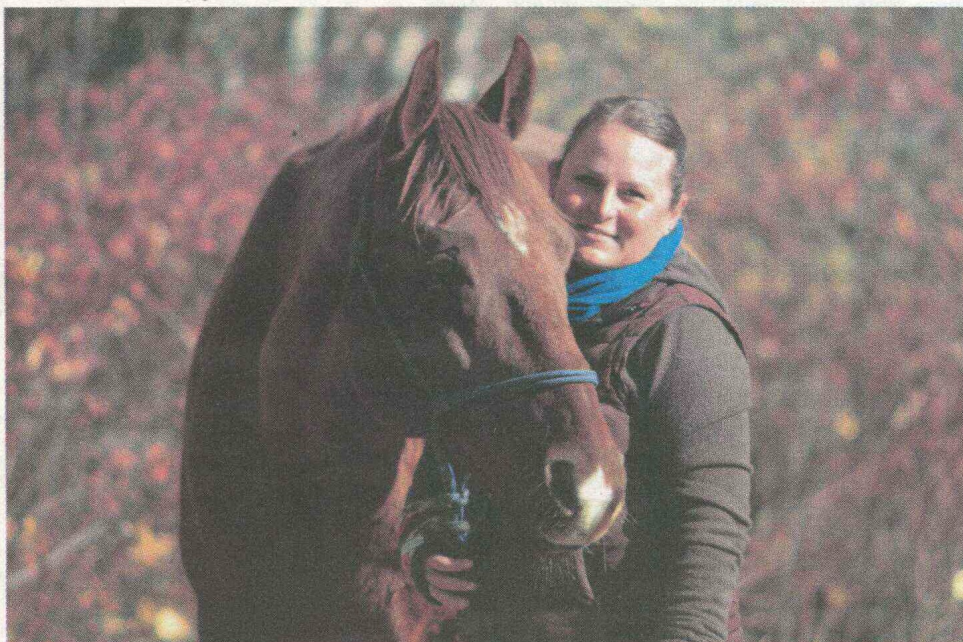
Leann, with the assistance of a certified therapist, works with youth who are diagnosed with Asperger's and/or autism. The core symptoms of these disorders include hyper-focus on one or two specific areas of interest, verbal and non-verbal communication difficulties, repetitive speech patterns, and clumsiness.

The first time autistic children are introduced to a horse, their behaviours can include crying, having tantrums, and avoidance. However, once the child is placed on the horse with someone supporting the child on the side, while another leads the horse, the behaviour almost always stops. It seems the gentle motion of riding causes a child to focus on that one thing—the movement of the horse.

As in any learning process, there may be a few bumps; tantrums may be repeated every time there is some change, such as when the horse stops walking. However, after the child is taught the command to get the horse to move again, the child's resistant behaviour stops.

Moreover, tactile senses are stimulated when the child touches the horse's coat, mane, and nose. The children's discovery of these sensations draws them out and helps to develop their verbal communication skills. They also begin to show interest in their surroundings.

As the children improve their motor



Quiggly and Leann. Photo credit: Tony Hetman

skills and build self-confidence through equine therapy in a safe environment, their ability to interact socially with humans also increases. Horses calm and soothe autistic children and bring them out of their shells.

Horses live in the moment, without judgment. For humans to successfully interact with them, horses invite them to do the same. Leann's focus is on how horsemanship skills can transfer across someone's entire life. She says, "A core piece of horsemanship is mindfulness, and effective horsemanship is impossible without it. Horsemanship intersects with ongoing research related to mental health and the treatment of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, and many other ailments that so many of our friends and family cope with every day."

When asked what is special about using horses in her work, Leann is quick to respond. "As a prey animal, and a very successful one at that, they have very effective fight or flight behaviours," she says. "They are also a very social animal whose survival is dependent on their inclusion in a herd. These characteristics match well with many human characteristics—the ones we usually like to rationalize around. As advanced as our cognitive brains can be, they often lead us astray with respect to our emotional lives. We can't outthink our pain or our traumatic experiences. This is where horses can help us see ourselves again so we can gain insight into our own experiences and become more mindful."

According to Leann, horses are very good at reading body language. That body language is their only language, and one we need to learn to be able to communicate with them. Leann says, "Horses actually want to partner with us if we can demonstrate that we are worthy. As humans, we can't make a horse do anything it doesn't choose. We can, however, be clear about what choices a horse may have with respect to us. And this is where the magic happens."

Horses, like humans, have personalities, thus horses selected for the program must meet a wide range of needs. For in-

stance, one of the horses at Riding 4 Life is, as Leann says, "quite lazy and dull when he's relaxed" which makes him a great choice when working with small, energetic children whose behaviour is sometimes unpredictable.

Each horse has a trusting and long-term relationship with a team member, which allows them to safely pair a horse with a beginner horseman. When new horsemen have limitations such as Autism, ADD, Tourette's syndrome, etc., it is important that safety is at the forefront.

According to Leann, therapeutic horsemanship is a growing industry. She points out that Canada's Veterans Affairs has been in the news because of funded research into horsemanship as treatment for Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Leann says, "Horses kept me sane through the trauma of my young life, so I don't need convincing. Governments and other sources of funding, however, do, and it seems research on the matter is reaching a tipping point where I don't sound flaky anymore when I talk about my life with horses."

There is no doubt humans have always benefited from their relationship with horses. The founding of the first therapeutic riding association less than a century ago has in many ways enhanced and enriched that relationship. And it has only been in the last 50 years or so that therapeutic riding has been studied academically in the western world. Leann observes, "Some First Nations peoples in North America have very rich traditions involving horses and the wellness of their people."

Next issue, we will meet Cassie and learn how horses have dramatically changed her life, as well as learn about the benefits all of us can receive from being with horses.

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.