

Horsing around builds confidence



[Jenna Dulewich](#)

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Lilly Morris, a mentor, takes Oreo for a walk outside of the Spirit Winds Ranch on April 8. The Spirit Winds Ranch is a place for children to come and experience horse therapy while doing fun and interactive games with the horses.

A 1,200 lb teacher named Oreo is educating Cochrane youth about life skills.

Lilly Morris, 14, was one of the horse's students last year as part of an equine-assisted learning partnership between Spirit Winds Ranch and Rocky View Schools. This year she is a mentor with the horse-based program.

"It's fun ... horses are great because they don't talk back or judge you," Morris said.

After learning how to handle the animal in an indoor arena, Morris said joining the program has helped her improve her confidence and social skills.

"I would recommend it whether you think you have a social problem or not," she said.

The partnership is between Rocky View Schools and southern Alberta ranches, including Spirit Winds and Whispering Equine. It started last March bringing area youth from elementary to high school to learn about effective communication and collaboration skills.

Laurel Griffin, ranch owner and teacher-assistant, said the program is for all youth from all walks of life.

"It's a nice way to blend community and farm and horses – the magic I got to feel as a child with horses is the magic these kids get to feel now but they don't have to have the farm ranch backgrounds," Griffin said.

"I wanted my farm to matter to the local community, that became my mantra ... most people don't have grandma or grandpa on the farm anymore and it connects them back to things that are not electronic."

Griffin calls herself a teacher assistant because the horses are the real teachers, she explained. The participants learn effective communication and collaboration skills by interacting with their steeds to solve a series of challenges.

The programs that vary from six to 12 weeks, for youth ages 10 and up offer a range of class sizes from one-on-one to group work.

The lesson theme last Saturday was "common sense" encouraging the youth to problem solve and understand how that skill can influence change.

"Sometimes you run into things, you are not sure what to do with," Griffin said.

"You need confidence and you need be to the boss of your horse otherwise your horse will be the boss of you."

Before the problem solving took place, the students spent time with their designated horses brushing or braiding their hair as a way to bond before tackling their weekly challenge.

“(The class) is harder for some people,” Morris explained but said that after a couple lessons most of the people get the hang of it.

The curriculum consists of a variety of challenges, such as the silent communication class where students are quiet and communicate with their horse via body language. Another is the blind man’s adventure, where the students are blindfolded and learn how to place trust in their equine teacher.

Paired in twos on Saturday, the students navigated their horses through a series of challenges, which forced them to work together to complete their obstacles.

Volunteer Dawn Mercer said the transformation from when the youth start the program to when they finish is “unbelievable.”

“Horses let you be, they don’t judge you. They are a lot more calm ... I love watching the horses and kids interact,” she said.

At the end of the lesson, the students sat and discussed what they learned and picked a keyword to sum up their day. One boy picked “stubborn” because his horse was being difficult that day. A girl picked “problem-solving” because she was happy that her and the horse were able to figure out the challenges.

Griffin said “willingness” because she was proud of everyone’s effort.



***About the Author:* Jenna Dulewich**

Jenna Dulewich is a national and provincial award-winning multi-media journalist. Joining the Rocky Mountain Outlook in 2019, she covers Stoney Nakoda, MD of Bighorn, Canmore and court.

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