

Spirit Winds Ranch making positive change in youth through horses



[Lindsay Seewalt](#)

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Laurel Griffin has worn many hats on her family ranch, Spirit Winds Ranch, none of which have fit so perfectly as her current one.

Located just north of Cochrane near Beaupre Hall, the concept of the ranch is facilitating connection between the ranch horses and the ranch visitors from the ground, as a non-riding facility.

With "heart in hand" (the offering to the horse from the participant) the crux of what the facility has become known for in recent years is its youth programs built on equine assisted learning and facilitated equine experiential learning (FEEL), facilitated by certified instructors and built on natural horsemanship concepts.

With a contract with Rocky View Schools to provide this alternate, intuitive learning to youth of all abilities, Griffin said she was inspired to give back when a 2014 horse magazine article on equine assisted therapy got the ball rolling to rebrand the former PMU farm into what it is today – a place of healing that is built on the powerful, spiritual connection between horse and human.

"My mantra became: how do I connect horses and people?" she said, adding that she was so moved by the suicides of several teenagers in Cochrane a few years ago that she decided it was time to heal the hurt in youth and help them connect with the 1,200-pound animals the way nature intended.

"It's the golden hour ... one (session) is enough to plant a seed," said Griffin, referring to the efficacy of a one-hour session. While the modules for students is typically six one-hour modules with an average of eight students each session, Griffin said even one session can tip the scales for some teens and result in positive changes in behaviour.

While the youth programming is often geared toward youth identified as having alternative learning needs or at-risk behaviours, the equine work is for anyone and at any age.

A group of six from Mitford Middle School arrived for their weekly module on April 2. Upon arrival, the group was a little subdued and disengaged from Griffin's quick intro to the plan of the day, as she and her volunteers readied the participants to lead their horses – Pinot, Foxy, Chip and Frank – through a series of obstacles. The students did these drills in teams of two and three, alternating wearing a blindfold and assisting each other and the horse to move through the course without falling or tripping.

Over the course of an hour, the youth became engaged with one another and the horses, became lively and shared in conversation and laughter. They finished the module with picking words that represented them for the day – words such as "trust," "fantastic," and "leadership."

"You find strengths in students where you wouldn't normally see it ... there's a level of calmness when they're around the horses," said Ginger McManus, a child development advisor for Mitford, who sees growth in students in such areas as social skills, boundaries, friendship, mood, leadership and coping mechanisms.

"Every day I wait for the day, Tuesdays, when we get to come out here," said one boy.

"I like it because I get out of math," laughed another girl. "At the beginning I feel kind of tense and worried that I'm going to do something wrong, but then I get happier."

For some, it's also a rare opportunity to be around horses and learn about them.

Griffin is reliant on grant funding and partnerships to expand her programming to keep up with demand. Spirit Winds Ranch received a \$5,000 grant from the Cochrane and District Foundation this year, dollars which will be put toward programming.

Other sponsors listed on her website include the Alberta Government, Cochrane Family and Community Support Services, Rocky View County, the Alberta Lottery Fund, the Town of Cochrane/United Way partnership and Canadian Tire Jumpstart.

She is also grateful for community and private sponsors and volunteers.

Learn more at spiritwindsranch.ca.

Stay tuned for a feature story on Spirit Winds Ranch, including the 72-year history of the horse ranch, in our upcoming edition of the Rockies' Edge Magazine.



***About the Author:* Lindsay Seewalt**

Lindsay is a senior Eagle reporter who has transformed her penchant for storytelling into the craft of writing.

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