

Horse talk

Even after 28 years of giving riding lessons and coaching Level 1 English and Western riding, Gayle Cartier had a lot to learn about horses. It wasn't until she and husband horse trainer Daryl Cartier formed a partnership with brother and sister-in-law Roger and Janice Boucher along with Grant and Tamra McKinnon did she realize that horses could teach her more than she could teach them or with them.

The three couples parlayed their expertise in riding instruction, curriculum development, horse training and the judicial system to create the

Cartier Equine Learning Centre at Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. It is a unique teaching ground for not just at risk youth, but school children of all learning levels as well as a leadership training facility for employers and employees. The curriculum evolved from the American wild horse program which pairs prison inmates with 8-year old and older horses. The inmates must work with the horses to train them to be adopted out. In the process, the rate for the inmates return to the system after release has dropped from over 90 percent to roughly 30 percent.

Tamra McKinnon is the creator of



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the "equine guided learning" program which is used at Cartier. "Horses demand respect and trust before they will respond," says McKinnon. "That is really the basis of the whole program. By developing the relationship between a person and a horse you open the door to better relationship skills, leadership skills and communication skills. The curriculum is based on 100 years of research into behavior modification and each exercise that we ask the participants to accomplish is geared to achieve what the individual needs to learn. That may be self-esteem, respect for others, learning how to work together as a team and so on. By understanding the learning process and how horses are programmed and with a strong curriculum I can almost 100 percent guarantee the outcome depending on the assignment."

During the week there is a youth

program that runs Monday through Thursday with two classes per day at 10 a.m. and 1 p.m. Fridays are for working and training the horses and the weekends are geared up for leadership training in the workplace. The group has added another component which is to teach others how to facilitate their own equine assisted learning (EAL) program.

Facilitation rather than teaching has become the buzz word with these educators. "Early on I realized that we needed to pay more attention to the response actions of the horses," says Cartier. "We were no longer the teachers - they were. It was my job to facilitate the process and their job to teach. They read what the children need better than we do. I thought my riding lesson experience would be a boost but I had to learn to stand back and quit teaching and allow the journey to evolve. It has



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now changed my whole approach to riding lessons and I've become more interactive giving the student more room to be more self-motivated."

One of the arena exercises is called "Right Hand - Left Hand". It involves three people. One is called

the brain and the brain is the only one that can talk. Each of the others are called the right hand or left hand. The brain must communicate to each of its hands what it wants them to do. "We first show the children on a flip chart what the brain and the



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The Equine Centre encourages teachers attending the classes to take the right hand and left hand theory back to the classroom to further develop communication skills.

hands must accomplish - it may be packing a brush kit for or doing some other task with the horses. This is an exciting learning tool for children with ADD, ADHD, and FAS who have trouble communicating clearly. Through this process the participants learn the correct way to interact with others to get the desired response. Sometimes there is dismemberment. The hand may leave the brain because the brain isn't communicating properly. Once there is an amputation then the brain must find a way to coax the hand to come back. It's all geared to team building and developing strong relationships.

The hands and the brain exchange places during this exercise."

The Equine Centre encourages teachers attending the classes to take the right hand and left hand theory back to the classroom to further develop communication skills. The University of Regina and the University of Saskatchewan are conducting a research program into the success of the combination of the curriculum and the horse experience.

Before and after each class both facilitators, Gayle Cartier and Janice Boucher go over what the participants are to learn that day to ensure that they accomplish the desired out-

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come. The debriefing is critical to the success of the program.

"The horse is the barometer that the facilitators watch," explains McKinnon. "The key component to a strong leadership message is that once they realize that the horse is part of the team and by studying its body language they can assess their own performance. The horses work off pressure and release. The horse waits for its command and if the person asks the horse too softly or too harshly the end result may not be satisfactory. So the horse literally teaches appropriate assertiveness by not responding. It's difficult to ignore a 1200 lb horse and when you're trying to control him so a certain amount of the desired result is drawn out of conflict."

One of the youth programs is



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During the week the centre has a youth program that runs Monday through Thursday with two classes per day at 10 a.m. and 1 p.m.



Before and after each class facilitators go over what the participants are to learn that day to ensure that they accomplish the desired outcome.

designed around a 12-14 week program. School students from area classrooms attend once weekly. Every one of the exercises is approved by a psychologist and passes the test for the Canadian International Learning Test. There are 15 trained quarter horses that are used in the program and all are over 8 years old.

The White Buffalo Inhalant Treatment Centre is a six-month residential treatment program for female, First Nations adolescents. They have been one of Cartier's clients for going on three years and attend Cartier twice weekly. The White Buffalo program is based on the concept of living therapy, which integrates four cornerstones of treatment that parallel teachings of

the medicine wheel - spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical.

"The Cartier Equine Learning Centre's curriculum certainly fits into the White Buffalo program which is based on personal development and growth for our youth," explains White Buffalo executive director Ernest Sauve. "It allows us to use another medium or model to deal with life issues and it provides a break from an institutional setting to an alternative site filled with new experiences. The girls form strong bonds with the horses and a good exchange with the facilitators."

The White Buffalo Inhalant Treatment Centre has a strong cultural component woven within their program which characterizes the horse as a significant care giver.

Throughout their history the horse was a provider used in buffalo hunting and continues to be cherished in First Nations ceremonies.

Quoting from the Pimatisiwin, A Journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous Community Health, written to track the partnership between the Cartier Program and the White Buffalo program, authors pointed out that in the literature animal-assisted interventions, in particular those with horses (i.e. equine), is an increasingly popular adjunct to traditional modes of working with high need youth with histories of emotional and behavioral trauma (Drawe, 2001; Ewing et.al., 2007; Lefkowitz, 2005; Reimer, 1999). The White Buffalo Inhalant Treatment Centre views this approach as not

entirely new, but rather, a return or (re) introduction to what is already known about the horse within a cultural context.

Because there is a network of treatment centres across Canada with similar services, there is a lot of interest in the Cartier program becoming an emerging model to be applied in a much larger context.

The Cartier Equine Learning Center is in the process of finalizing a partnership with other First Nations communities. McKinnon has developed a similar EAL program to be taught in reserve schools aimed at being proactive as opposed to reactive when teaching communication and leadership skills to aboriginal youth.

by Bonnie Warnyca

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