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# Healing Patterns

*Smiling Goat Ranch uses colorful horses to provide specialized therapy for humans in need.*

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By L.A. Sokolowski

**W**hy do we smile? The answer, in part, is because it activates our brain, stimulating its emotional center (the amygdala) while releasing neural communication-boosting neuropeptides like oxytocin and mood-elevating neurotransmitters, like dopamine and serotonin.

Smiling invites a chemical domino effect that opens us up to relating better with others and with ourselves.

It also happens to be the goal of Smiling Goat Ranch, a transformative haven in Carbondale, Colorado, where Sheryl Barto and her menagerie, including a Paint Horse called “Gates,” offer

equine-assisted therapy based on the Horse Boy Method at no charge to families living with loved ones on the autism spectrum.

The Horse Boy Method started in 2004, when a Texas father named Rupert Isaacson sought a better way of connecting with his own autistic son, Rowan. The method sees autism not as a

problem to be fixed but as a skill-set and series of gifts, and it serves roughly 20,000 families weekly in 20 different countries. While some program participants do emerge as riders, it's more about achieving communication and self-advocacy, using horses as colleagues.

Over the last five years, Sheryl has watched Smiling Goat Ranch help hundreds of children and adults. Like Rupert, she found herself on a journey toward better connection with her own autistic son. When she started, she might have been green broke about running a therapeutic nonprofit, but she had a few good horses and decided she could learn the rest while carving some fresh neural pathways of her own.

Now a Horse Boy Method certified trainer, Sheryl says Smiling Goat Ranch made a vow to never to let fees hinder healing. And she means it.

## From Horses to Horse Boy

Colorful horses have always been a part of life for the daughter of Sherbyn Ostrich, a veterinarian and past president of the American Veterinary Medical Association. Sheryl grew up exploring the orchards and farms of Pennsylvania from the back of a pony called Tomahawk's Supreme, joined by the family dog Brownie. She started riding Paints in college.

"My first was Hi Dell's King. I showed in chaps that my dad had custom made from the hide of a deer he shot," Sheryl said. A degree in journalism led to work in public relations that has been her day job ever since.

Sheryl's work led her to the Horse Boy Method. In 2012, she did pro bono public relations work for a local autism group, Ascendigo, which was planning its first fundraising gala in Aspen; Rupert was among its celebrity autism parents.

"I had never heard of him and found that incredible because I had a son with autism and was



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horse crazy, although horses had been on hiatus for years," she said. "I watched Rupert and Iliane (Lorenz) demonstrate how they taught kids literacy, math, geography and history, all from the back of a horse. I was moved to tears. It was as beautiful as it was effective."

She came home to her husband, Karl Hanlon (they had been married only nine months), and pronounced that she had found her calling—how would he feel about adding horses to their lives?

Fortunately, the newlywed had grown up on a cattle ranch in Wyoming. "Yes" was an easy answer. From mentors like Rupert, Rowan and Dr. Temple Grandin, Sheryl learned to listen for the cadence of her own son.

"Temple's advice is to follow a child intellectually, physically and emotionally," Sheryl said. "This includes building on their interests. From age 2,

my son was obsessed with cars and trucks. Some think it's unusual or impossible for an autistic to drive. For my son, he was so obsessed with driving he was quite good at it. He got his license at 16 and became a FedEx ground driver. He's an essential worker now, delivering medicine to the local hospital and doctors' offices."

## Horses that Say 'Yes'

In 2015, Smiling Goat Ranch opened with one Paint Horse among its herd of three.

"Our first two clients were families with pre-school age children who are still clients today. Since we opened, we have seen more than 360 people come through our gates: kids with autism, veterans with PTSD and teens with anxiety and depression. Now we have six horses, two miniatures, three goats, two bunnies and two dogs."

All are therapy animals that participate in the program.

"We create horses that say 'Yes,'" Sheryl said, basing the ranch's equine training on classical dressage and collection.

"We build enough muscle so the work is easy, and we train the mind by altering the routine. We want a horse flexible in mind and body to, in turn, create cadence and collection. Our training has consistently proven effective in producing safe and engaged horses."

"Takoda" and Gates are the program's Paint partners.

The "super calm" Takoda, whose Sioux Nation name means "friend of everyone," is a wonderful sensory and riding horse. But it's Gates, a 1997 sorrel solid gelding otherwise known as Silent Charm, with whom Sheryl shares an extra-special bond.

"Gates," she grinned, "had to have been my husband in another life. He's my go-to for long lining. He has the smoothest Western trot. The kids squeal in delight when he jogs, and he is per-



“Sometimes all it takes is putting your arms around a horse’s neck and a floodgate of emotion opens up, which leads to release and then relaxation.”

fect for teaching students who have never long lined how to do it.”

Gates was donated to Smiling Goat Ranch from Big Creek Ranch in Wyoming. Sheryl calls the stalwart veteran the “cornerstone” of her program. Two other mares round out the herd, used as sensory and in-hand work.

## Paints & Patterns

The horses’ good energy helped draw the pain out of one Navy nurse who, as part of the Method’s sensory work, spent two hours napping, nestled into a mare nicknamed “Alaska” in a healing position known fondly as a “butt hug.”

“For this kind of work, we use the horse like a big old couch. People automatically seek three positions: leaning forward, leaning back or the butt hug. We work in teams of three who offer support from the ground, so the person on the horse feels safe and accepted,” Sheryl explained.

The Horse Boy Method seeks to achieve neuro-plasticity which, simply put, is a re-patterning of the brain.

“Our neuro-cognitive approach is not designed for regular therapeutic riding serving physical disabilities,” Sheryl said. “We are specifically for neuro-psychiatric conditions. We are all about the brain and how to re-pattern the brain by reducing CDR—cell danger response—through cadence rhythms and activating the frontal lobe.”

CDR biology is a relatively new science that connects environmental health to chronic illness. *Autism.org* cites CDR as a method to impact human thought and behavior, child development, physical fitness and fertility.

Body-to-body contact between a human and horse reduces stress, Sheryl explains, because oxytocin is released in response to the sensory stimulation from its warmth and touch, helping to calm the sensory system. While on a horse, the rider’s

psoas muscle—the primary connector between the trunk and lower limbs—is gently stretched and relaxed; for those with autism, stimming—body rocking and twirling, or flapping the hands—and temper tantrums often stop.

“The mind stops racing,” Sheryl said. “Words don’t do this work justice. You have to experience it to understand the power of sensory work. Sometimes all it takes is putting your arms around a horse’s neck and a floodgate of emotion opens up, which leads to release and then relaxation.”

“We have witnessed people, like our Navy nurse, fall asleep in the butt-hugging position. Countless veterans have told me they can finally sleep through the night after sensory work here.”

The ranch also has an “Academics on Horseback” program, where a child rides in front of Sheryl or a certified rider or is long lined if too big to share a saddle.

“We ride in collection or drive the horse in

“There is so much potential to help people, when you integrate the outdoors and the healing qualities of animals.”

long lines, so the rocking of the pelvis is done in rhythm and creates the feel-good, communication hormone oxytocin. We move on to back-riding with rules-based games like tag and hide and seek.

“Then we introduce academic games. You can teach math in many ways, including using a horse to round up volunteers to demonstrate addition or multiplication, or riding between them to show subtraction or division.”

## Service Equals Happiness

For its first five years, Smiling Goat Ranch operated without a single employee. It was the newlyweds’ labor of love.

“I could never have done this without Karl’s support. He built all the animal infrastructure on the property—all the pens, corrals and sheds—and helps with the ranch work,” Sheryl said.

To kick off 2021, Smiling Goat Ranch raised funds to cover the first four months’ employment for Kaylee, its first certified therapeutic recreation specialist.

“It’s a two-for-one deal,” Sheryl said. “She has horse skills and is approved to supervise interns in the CTRS field. So we hope to raise funds to keep her employed year-round.”

Fundraising, Sheryl confesses, was not her wheelhouse.

“I learned so much from other nonprofit agencies on networking, fundraising and brainstorming special events,” she said. “There was a conference called Rural Philanthropy Days and I learned so much about grant writing and how to build relationships with foundations.

“My advice is to start applying for grants within the county where your program is located, as well as surrounding counties where you could have an impact. Most counties have a Health and Human

Services Department that can guide you.”

Vietnam veteran, SGR board member and retired U.S. Marine Corps Lt. Col. Dick Merritt is a staunch advocate of the ranch and its program.

“We need more places like Smiling Goat Ranch. This clinically proven program puts those with neurosensory conditions like PTSD, autism, anxiety and depression in a healing environment,” he said. “There is so much potential to help people, when you integrate the outdoors and the healing qualities of animals.”

But it’s not just the program participants who benefit. Sheryl thrives on the work and giving back.

“The secret to human happiness is service to others. Children with autism are the healers and we are the ones being healed,” she said. “There seems to be this contract with the universe that, if you put your dreams into the service of the dreams of those more vulnerable than yourself, then your own start to come true. Service equals happiness. I can attest to this.

“When I entered college, I wanted to be a horse trainer. My mom said ‘no’. But now, my dream has come true. I wake up every day and have these beautiful animals, on beautiful property in a beautiful valley, with an amazing, supportive husband, surrounded by incredible people and volunteers, and I get to train horses.”

And that’s certainly something worth smiling about. ☺



### Support Smiles

What’s the best way to help Smiling Goat Ranch and programs like them? Donate, volunteer and help spread the word. Start by learning more about Smiling Goat Ranch online.

[smilinggoatranch.com](http://smilinggoatranch.com)