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THE
HEALING POWER OF
Horses

ABIGAIL HORNİK & CHINOOK HORSES ARE IN THE ARENA OF CHANGING LIVES

written by JULIE KOERBER photography by DANIEL SULLIVAN



IT'S A BRISK WINTER DAY and the sun is starting to set, casting a golden glow over the outdoor arena at White Aspen Ranch. You can see the breath of the ponies as they snort and make their way over to the gate. Abigail Hornik of Chinook Horses is on her afternoon circle, checking on her "herd."

"This is Boy," she says pointing to a miniature donkey who, despite his spunky presence, Abigail says is around 40 years old. If you glance at the animal, you'd swear he was smiling. "He's one of our amazing therapy animals. He and Mojo always know exactly what the kids need."

Boy, Little Debbie, Mavis, Buster, Jenny and Mojo are just a few of the animals that run at the center of Chinook Horses, a non-profit with the strong belief that horses have the power to heal through equine-facilitated therapy.

"I think horses are innately empathic," Abigail says. Not only is she the nonprofit's executive director, she's the equine specialist helping to guide the programming behind this unique therapy. As she continues her walk, she points out Mojo, the large chestnut-colored gelding who was named after Abigail's father.

"I bought him the year that my father died," she says. And every time she would work to exercise the horse after her father's death, "Mojo literally would wrap his neck around me and hug me. It was the only time I could cry and mourn my father. It was the only place where I felt safe to do that."

It's the memory she reaches for when talking about why she left her high-powered New York City life, packed up her vehicle with all her belongings and made the move to Montana close to 20 years ago. Abigail had been working for a web browser company during the pre-Google days. The management and sales job brought high stress, and 80-hour work weeks with little room for rest.

"In 2001, the industry started to implode," she says. "It was heart-breaking for me because I poured my heart and soul into the company."

Somewhere around that time, Abigail remembers sitting in the doctor's office and picking up *Town and Country* magazine. She locked in on a short article about a man in Browning, Montana, who was breeding Spanish mustangs, known as the original buffalo runners.

"When I read about this guy, I bought a plane ticket to Great Falls, rented a car, and drove to Browning," Abigail says. "The ranch was right at the foothills of Glacier National Park and it was just beautiful. To sleep in a tepee and hear the horses run around at night, it was absolutely amazing." The man ran a program designed to let young men and boys on the reservation take care of the horses as a way to distract them from drugs and alcohol.

After taking a short leave of absence to clear her head and check out the program, Abigail ended up flying back to New York the night of Sept. 10, 2001.

THERE'S A PROFOUND COMMUNICATION THAT CAN TAKE PLACE BETWEEN A HUMAN AND AN ANIMAL, IN THIS CASE HORSES.

— Abigail Hornik



"I saw the towers go down from my apartment window when I woke up the next day," she says. "I had nothing in my apartment, I had no water, no electricity and no groceries. Nothing."

Within a year, she realized she also had nothing to lose. In 2002, she made her way back to Montana, where she eventually met her husband and started to set her sights on the western way of life.

"I thought, this is what I am going to do to heal," Abigail says. "When I was making that decision about such a dramatic career shift, it was either going back to grad school for art history or doing this. I went for an interview for NYU's grad school. Their art history program is in Doris Duke's (billionaire and heiress) former mansion across from the Metropolitan Museum of Art on Fifth Avenue. It's beautiful. I walked out and I thought, 'Do I want to be here every day, or do I want to be in a barn with horses and kids?' My heart immediately went to the kids and horses."

By 2012, after dabbling in gallery management (she still manages the Stapleton Gallery in downtown Billings) and running a successful western homeware company, Abigail started to shift her focus. She took two years to get certified in not one but two different forms of equine-assisted therapy and discovered that at times, there are more teachable moments in a horse arena than in a therapist's office.

"There's a profound communication that can take place between

a human and an animal, in this case horses," Abigail says. "It's communication in the absence of words – the horse can take it and not react to it with the judgment that you or I might."

By 2015, Abigail was working with a therapist willing to share in equine therapy. "I quickly learned that the people who needed it most couldn't afford it, so we became a not-for-profit in 2016," she says.

“HORSES ARE HIGHLY SENSITIVE TO BODY LANGUAGE, ENERGY AND EMOTIONAL STATE. THEY RESPOND TO EVEN THE SLIGHTEST CHANGE IN OUR ATTITUDE.”
— Abigail Hornik

In addition to taking referrals from Child Protective Services, Chinook Horses works with nonprofits that help provide for children who have dealt with significant trauma. "Physical abuse, neglect, emotional abuse, living with a parent who has an addiction —that's probably most of what we see," Abigail says, adding that the bulk of her work is funded by Medicaid. The nonprofit raises money to help fill in the funding gaps.

"We do work with families in family court for reunification," Abigail says.

"We can learn a lot about a parent and their skills seeing them in the arena with their child and a herd of horses. There's a big difference between a parent who will step between a horse and a child to protect the child and a parent who will put a child in front of them to protect themselves from the horse. We can learn a lot in that therapy session."

Each session, a child is assigned to a "herd" with two to four horses. Abigail partners with not only therapists but professionals trained to understand a mind that isn't wired neurotypically. Those with autism or those who have witnessed trauma process



things differently, and each 45-minute session is tailored to that child's therapeutic goals. Abigail has seen more than a few breakthroughs standing in the dirt in the middle of an arena.

"We had a little boy who was 8 years old," she says. "He had such severe anxiety and he couldn't go to school. He came, but he wouldn't get out of the car. He could see the session from his car window."

The second week, he left his car and stood by the fence outside the arena where Mojo walked over to greet him. "The third week, Mojo stuck his head out again. I asked him if he wanted to come in and meet this horse and he said 'yes.' By the end of the summer, he was the leader of the group. He came back in the fall for another round and he turned to his occupational therapist and said, 'I just need to let you know that I am really unhappy that Mojo isn't in my herd.' What's significant about that is not only did he speak but he asserted what he needed." Abigail calls it just one of many miracles. "For a kid with such severe social anxiety that he couldn't speak and get out of his car to 12 weeks later being able to articulate what he needed is just mind-blowing."

If you watch a session, you see almost immediately that it's different. The horses are unhaltered and let loose in the middle of the arena. It may sound unsafe, but that's when the magic happens, Abigail says.

"Horses are highly sensitive to body language, energy and emotional state. They respond to even the slightest change in our attitude," Abigail says. So, if a child throws a tantrum, "The horse just moves away. That's what he does to calm himself." And, as a result, it creates a teachable moment and shows the child how his or her behavior affects others.

"Right away, I saw a light at the end of the tunnel with the effects of our work. In a very short period of time, I saw shifts in the

child's sense of worth," Abigail says. "I have had therapists tell me, 'Wow, I can't believe how quickly we just worked through that. That would have taken years in the office.' And it just plays out right there."

While Chinook Horses started with a therapeutic approach, recently Abigail added a leadership course called "The Leader in Me," based on Sean Covey's book "The Seven Habits of Happy Kids." It's helping children at a young age to learn critical problem-solving skills and how to collaborate and work as a team.

"For the most part, the population we serve is children because that is my passion," she says. This year she's served roughly 60 children but has the capacity to serve so many more.

Eventually, Abigail wants to be able to pass the executive director and fundraising torch to someone "born to do this work," so she can focus on creating programs that directly impact children. She doesn't want to be tied to a desk in an office. But for now, she wears all the nonprofit leadership hats, making her rounds, filling her days with loving on horses and helping children heal.

"It sounds hokey," she says. "I don't get paid monetarily, but I get paid in spades by the way I get to spend my day. I don't know anyone who has a better job than I do."

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT CHINOOK HORSES, visit chinookhorses.org ✨