

CHINOOK HORSES: A JOURNEY FROM BROOKLYN TO BROWNING TO BILLINGS



Buster the Pony

THE TRANSCENDENT, HEALING
CONNECTION BETWEEN HUMANS
AND HORSES



"FOR WHATEVER REASON, I HAVE ALWAYS HAD THE BELIEF SYSTEM THAT HORSES WERE HEALERS," ABIGAIL HORNİK TOLD ME DURING A GOOGLE VIDEO CALL FROM HER HOME IN BILLINGS. She wore rectangular glasses and sat on her bed, relaxed and comfortable against the pillows. A self-starter, Hornik has been an entrepreneur, businesswoman, and co-founder of several divergent lines of work, including a home accessories company and breeding mustangs. But as we began to shift the conversation from her work to talk about horses and their surprisingly prominent role during the course of her life, Hornik's passion and excitement could not be contained. Her confidence and assuredness struck me as she explained Chinook Horses, the nonprofit organization she began in 2016, and the revolutionary equine therapy that has helped transform her perspective completely.

Hornik's experiences are a series of stories with a single, subtle thread that weaves together the fabric of her life. When she was a child in New York, she loved to take horseback riding lessons, and as she dipped her toes in the corporate world, her years of working online in marketing and advertising seemed like only a detour until she got back to what she called her "first love": connecting with and training horses. In 2000, Hornik was sitting in the lobby of a doctor's office when she picked

up a Country magazine. Riffing lazily through the pages, her gaze fell on an article about a man who bred Spanish mustangs in Browning, Montana. His intent was to distract the local Native American Blackfeet children from drug addiction and alcoholism. "I read about it," Hornik recalled, "took a plane to Great Falls, rented a car, and drove up to Browning." She stayed on the man's ranch on the foothills of Glacier National Park, and at night in her tepee she heard herds of horses galloping only feet from the entrance. She hadn't found the horses, but rather the other way around. The following summer, Hornik packed her belongings, bought a used pickup truck and traded New York skylines for the Big Sky country.

Hornik reconnected with a photographer friend in Browning who eventually became her husband. Together they began an interior high end home accessories company called Western Goods, which often featured equine themes. "The West was won with horses," Hornik said. "Historically, we are so deeply connected; it's very profound."

The 2008 financial crisis forced her company to close its doors, and Hornik went on the hunt for meaningful work again. She recalled her first days in Montana, seeking out a brave new life breeding mustangs on the wild plains. Hornik soon discovered the practice of equine assisted therapy and its fast-growing field of research.

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She dove headlong into it, earning two certifications of Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association and becoming certified as a therapeutic riding instructor at Rocky Mountain College in Billings and as an Equine Specialist in Mental Health and Learning. Having acquired the know-how, Hornik's impatient, self-propelling nature pushed her into founding a nonprofit organization centered around horse therapy, and Chinook Horses was born.

The structure of the practice is simple but professional. The EAGALA model—in which a mental health specialist and an Equine Specialist to work together with clients alongside the horses—has produced positive outcomes in the patients who need help the most. Clients, most of them children, arrive at Chinook Horses with troubled backgrounds or having experienced some form of trauma, needing the peace that comes from quiet, gentle animals who help them rediscover emotional stability.

During a session, clients are introduced to two or three horses while a mental health specialist and Equine Therapist stand alert nearby. The horses are not tied up, and are free to approach the client if they choose. Whether or not the animals investigate is generally based on the client's emotional state; horses can sense whether people are volatile or afraid. However, horses tend to be very nurturing and affectionate when they sense that a person is sad or lonely, and will approach them in order to comfort. "They're like sponges," Hornik said. "They truly are healers."

Interacting with horses not only heals but also cultivates learning in children or adults who are atypical thinkers. People who have undeveloped social thinking or are nonverbal can thrive when they interact with horses. "We teach things like thinking with your eyes," said Hornik, "body awareness, and paying attention to [the client's] relation to the animal." While human therapy has its limits, horses are non-judgmental and can manage learning difficulties with ease. "Sometimes kids just tell their story to the horse," Hornik said. In facilitating an environment of physical and emotional connection, Chinook Horses helps clients rewrite their stories.

The relationship is not one-sided: horses themselves are emotional creatures who learn as much from humans as we learn from them. "I own three horses," Hornik said. "They recognize my voice, the people that are emotionally connected to them . . .

I definitely think they have their people." When Hornik's father passed away, she found incredible comfort in her first horse, a failed racehorse thoroughbred named Montana Joe, or MoJo for short. "He was the only creature I could cry in front of," she said. She also trained an exceptionally high strung, difficult horse named Vixen, whom she nicknamed ViVi. "She went from being almost scary to being a very sweet horse. There's this saying of 'love someone through it', and I think I've loved her through it." In addition, training and owning horses has dramatically improved Hornik's confidence in herself and her abilities. It has also forced Hornik to be patient—after years of high speed city life, Hornik has learned to slow down around the reactionary, emotional animals. "I had to be really really patient until [ViVi] got to a place where she trusted me," she recalled. Physiologically, horses have also been proven to slow down human heartbeats during bonding times.

Part of Hornik's motivation for beginning a nonprofit organization was that many people cannot afford horse therapy. The clients often come from poor or unstable backgrounds, and the extensive care required is usually too expensive to foster any real change. With the grants and donations given to Chinook in the past few years, they are now looking forward to expanding their organization. Chinook Horses aims to have its own facility, as well as respites and places of employment for people with learning disabilities. Additionally, Hornik hopes that the Billings community will become more aware of the benefits and efficacy of horse therapy. "If we save one kid from the foster care system, heal trauma and change their story," Hornik said, "the course of their life is going to look very different than if there wasn't intervention."

Chinook Horses has already seen tremendous success. Over the Christmas holidays, Hornik received a phone call from an elderly woman in Kansas concerning her grandchild, who had attended several therapy sessions. The child had formerly been nonverbal, and her parents feared that her disability would never be overcome. However, the woman told Hornik, in a seemingly miraculous recovery, she was now speaking and talking like everybody else. Instead of giving presents that year, the woman gave a sizable donation to Chinook in gratitude. "I don't think she ever really would have talked if it wasn't for your program," she said.

