

The hearts of horses



Kelly Coolbaugh, owner of Long View Equine Gestalt Coaching near Gillett, stands with Preacher, a 6-year-old mustang, one of the therapy horses she uses to help clients deal with emotional issues. JEFF MURRAY/ELMIRA STAR-GAZETTE

Northern Tier woman uses the animals to help people cope with stress, trauma

Jeff Murray Elmira Star-Gazette | USA TODAY NETWORK

Kelly Coolbaugh grew up with horses, but she never imagined she could use her equine connection to help other people. • Then her mother died of cancer in 2017, and while looking for ways to deal with her grief, Coolbaugh stumbled across a concept that taps into a horse's natural ability to sense a person's emotional state to help them confront and cope with those feelings. • While attending an annual horse exposition in Massachusetts, Coolbaugh learned of a practice known as "equine gestalt," which pairs a trained human therapist with a horse to help people work through often buried emotional issues.

See HORSES, Page 10A



Kelly Coolbaugh, owner of Long View Equine Gestalt Coaching, shares a quiet moment with one of her horses.

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Horses

Continued from Page 1A

Coolbaugh used that revelation to create her own business, Long View Equine Gestalt Coaching, and now she and her hooved associates help others overcome grief, stress, trauma and other emotional issues.

"Through a joint effort the coach and their horse partner assist with raising the client's awareness around their present emotional, physical and mental state," Coolbaugh said. "The horses assist the human coach on picking up on the client's internal subtle cues. Horses also provide support, comfort and assurance throughout the session while staying present and not judging."

How equine gestalt therapy works

Gestalt is a psychotherapeutic approach that focuses on the present moment.

Gestalt therapy is a way to identify the "junk drawer" of hidden emotional baggage and helping people let go of those burdens, Coolbaugh said.

Coolbaugh and her family live on a 50-acre farm on a hilltop just east of Gillett, Pennsylvania, about half an hour south of Elmira, and she believes just a visit to the quiet, rustic setting can offer a break from the bustle of everyday life.

Coolbaugh has four full-sized horses and one miniature horse she uses in her therapy program.

There are other therapeutic programs using horses out there, but most of them involve riding, Coolbaugh said, while her horses provide another window into hidden issues that are troubling her clients.

"It's amazing what these horses can pick up on," she said.

"Horses read energy really well. In the wild they have to, to be alert for predators," Coolbaugh said. "All horses have the ability to coach, and I also learned a lot of psychotherapy tools to



Long View Equine Gestalt Coaching near Gillett.

about having therapy with a horse, but decided to give it a try with an open mind.

As part of the session, Coolbaugh gave Gormley a cinderblock — representing the weight of the emotional burden she carried — and put her in a round pen with one of her horses.

"We went around two times, and then the horse put his nose up and knocked the cinderblock out of my hand," Gormley said. "It was as if to say 'You've done everything you need to do. Let it go.'"

"Sometimes you are struggling with something that takes over your life. That's what was happening with me," she said. "I had to be in a better place. I feel like I'm a completely different person now."

Kellsie Peck, of Wellsboro, also had her doubts about any kind of counseling that involved input from a horse, but she was struggling with grief after losing her father.

When Peck heard about Coolbaugh's program through a coworker, she decided to give it a try, and it was a decision she never regretted.

"Kelly and her horses are my 'emotional vacuums,'" Peck said. "She has a way of pulling emotions, feelings, thoughts related to all kinds of experiences out and bringing to light why they may bother me the way they do."

Peck has been through several sessions with Coolbaugh and her horses, and said she would absolutely recommend the program to anyone dealing with unresolved emotional issues.

"I cannot explain how much Kelly has helped me not only in crisis but in everyday life," Peck said. "She and her horses are an invaluable asset to someone looking for help processing grief or looking for better understanding of their emotions in general."

Building for the future

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"Horses read energy really well. In the wild they have to, to be alert for predators," Coolbaugh said. "All horses have the ability to coach, and I also learned a lot of psychotherapy tools to help individuals. I'm not telling my clients what to do or how to feel. I bring awareness to areas of their life they are having issues with."

Coolbaugh was certified as an equine gestalt coach through Touched by a Horse, a Colorado-based program



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founded by psychotherapist and author Melisa Pearce.

As a coach works with a client and assists them in connecting with their inner wounds, the horse will pick up on that energy, often lowering their heads in recognition or physically touching the client with their nose, Pearce said.

"Through thousands of years of partnership, horses have come to understand us like no other being," she said. "The eyes of a horse can see to places deep within us, and their hearts can reach places we ourselves do not know how to find. With their touch — their mere presence — they can heal us, making whole that which was fragmented; restoring that which was lost."

'I'm a completely different person now'

Jen Gormley, of Troy, went through a divorce more than four years ago, and since then has struggled to balance her job at Guthrie Troy Community Hospital with studies to become a nurse, along with being a single parent to three boys.

Over the years, Gormley has been in marriage counseling, divorce counseling and post-divorce counseling, but still struggled with the emotional turmoil it brought on her.

Then she met Coolbaugh, who persuaded Gormley to give her equine gestalt therapy a try.

Gormley admits she was skeptical

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Building for the future

Coolbaugh was the victim of some unfortunate timing when she launched her new business.

"In 2020, I became certified right before the pandemic," she said, adding COVID-19 restrictions made it difficult to get her new venture established.

Now Coolbaugh is looking to reach out to more people who are searching for answers. Even people who have been in other forms of therapy for various issues can benefit from equine gestalt coaching, she said.

"A lot of people go to therapy for years. They are stuck in therapy," Coolbaugh said. "My big area is working through grief. I also help a lot of people with relationship issues in general, anxiety, overwhelming things in life."

Coolbaugh has a full-time job as an occupational therapist with Guthrie, but she hopes to someday make equine gestalt therapy her full-time pursuit.

While her farm is on a remote hilltop, it's also within easy driving distance of several population centers, she said.

"This, I believe, is my true calling. When people reach the end of their rope, they will come," Coolbaugh said. "We're only 25 minutes from Elmira, and from Sayre, 30 minutes. It's so beautiful out here. To live in the 'here and now' is healing."

For more information about equine gestalt coaching, or to schedule an appointment with Kelly Coolbaugh, call 607- 353-9279, or go to longviewequinegestaltcoaching.com/contact.

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Spring that spoke out against how gun violence hurt young people everywhere. It called on leaders to put policies in place that mandate more background

us students to help make safer from gun violence