



## **Raise A Child's Hope Through Their Relationship With A Horse**

*by Cary R. Shapiro, with co-editor Sara Shapiro*

### **Outstanding Equestrian Non-Profit Serving Santa Clara, San Mateo, and Alameda Counties at Almaden Equestrian Center's Rural Ranch**



*Do you know about this non-profit gem, Victory Ranch (VR) that serves budding 8-16 year old equestrian youth deserving equal advantages? This article will introduce you to the therapeutic aspects of the perfect partnership between kids and horses, and the realized 20-year dream of **Disabled American Veteran, Doug Hutten**, founder and Executive Director of Victory Ranch. You may have heard of him from his other affiliations: 40-year equestrian, former San Francisco Mounted Deputy Sheriff, Western Horseman Magazine Writer, California and Colorado Search and Rescue team member, trail boss for pack trips, celebrity charity event organizer for Cure Autism Now, fundraiser for B.O.K.'s annual trail ride, etc. You can read [Doug's complete bio here](#).*

*In addition, VR's Equine Assisted Psychotherapy sessions (EAP) - composed, structured and delivered following standards set by the certificating association, EAGALA, continue to help individuals, families, and couples. He now makes up one half of the professional therapy team comprised of a psychotherapist and equine specialist.*

*When you visit the Ranch, the comfortable, homey feeling of the weathered barns, the horses' whinnies, and gleeful voices belies how deeply this very special place touches the lives of disadvantaged children. You can see they are having fun! They look at home in light blue Victory Ranch shirts and stand tall in their donated Ariat boots. If you go in the summer, the sweet, dry warmth will lure you toward the shade of the large tree near the cozy outdoor cafe, or the stalls where the horses stay cool before they head out to the round pen. To get there, you pass the hay barn where the Buckaroo Program is held and may be observed.*

### **Victory Ranch's Kids and Horses Education Program (KHEP)**

Doug Hutten's dream was inaugurated with his Kids and Horses Education Program. Doug discovered that his recovery from a life-threatening illness in 2006 and his relationships with his horses could come together with his other passion: kids who need some caring, so he launched KHEP. His outdoor, year-round, 5-week/10-session after school program is designed for local, culturally diverse, disadvantaged and underserved youth, aiming to make their challenges "mountable." These kids leave the program with



an "I can do it" attitude. Doug's victories over his own personal challenges inspired the name Victory Ranch.

The innovative program serves children who may be receiving social services or counseling, and may have diagnoses for various behavioral or psychological disorders (anxiety, attention deficit, depression, bipolar), or waiting for adoptive or foster parents. Most are "at-risk", low-income, and are navigating through their daily life challenges.

This article will explain how self-confidence, personal achievement, behavioral challenges, and communication/ social skills are improved through the program. You'll also learn about other VR programs in development, our research study and contact information for a child you may know who would benefit from this experience, as well as many ways to partner with Victory Ranch.

Doug begins sessions using his innovative horse education workbook the Buckaroo Book, designed in line with California Educational Standards curriculum. At the beginning of each session, children feel out the environment, meet the horses, and begin to find their place in the group. During the initial classroom part of a session, each child reads aloud, helping each other as needed. They are introduced to equine language and build comprehension as the lessons progress toward working with the horses. They develop the focus needed to sit still at a table when they can smell the hay and hear the horses nickering to each other outside. Feedback informs us the kids are more eager than in their school-year classrooms and they clearly enjoy the fresh air and the freedom to be themselves. There is something about a fun, outdoor environment that makes learning particularly conducive. And, of course, overlapping life lessons peek out at every turn.

Students observe, discuss and participate in hands-on activities. They learn barn rules, horse experiences, history, anatomy and physiology, natural behavior, safety and handling, leading, grooming, washing and feeding, tacking and riding basics. Throughout all sessions, children develop communication and relationship skills that are reinforced through all interactions with the horses. Children who spend time at Victory Ranch learn to connect with and calmly approach a large animal, 20-25 times their weight without frightening it. They practice team skills, bonding with a horse partner, and riding.

## **Did You Say You Saw Kids Willingly Muck a Stall?**



If you thought these kids would shy away from mucking stalls, you'd be surprised. I'm talking immaculate. They are seriously into it. Accepting responsibility for the job that needs to be done, that helps a horse they have bonded with and who is there for them, makes them want to make their stalls fly-free. You certainly couldn't nag them to do it. They know that a horse can't be nagged either and that seems pertinent somehow.

Where is the whining? Well, there is whinnying. Wanting to ride a horse at the end of the program makes it easier to learn to pay attention to safe barn rules. It is evident when you watch the kids with the horses that they start to figure out that if they are calm the horses stay calm and neither is frightened. It becomes easier to control the urge to yell and run. They learn the importance of impulse control, not wasting time, and

following directions for a reason. Observing herd mentality, being with and directing the horses raises their awareness of cause and effect. They learn that they can control their own actions to get what they want. Things make sense at a horse ranch; they often don't elsewhere.

## **What Makes Victory Ranch So Successful, Educationally and Therapeutically, and How Do Horses Help Kids with Challenges?**

*What's so special about the relationship between these horses and these kids? Why do they need a special program? Can't they just take lessons like other kids? Should kids with fewer advantages try to learn to ride if they can't afford to pay for lessons?* These are questions that Victory Ranch in San Jose has been answering for over five years. The answer is in the partnerships, the child-horse kinship, worthwhile outdoor education, and an effective teacher-leader. You also see that each and every child is noticed, cared about, given the chance to excel, and receives a therapeutic hands-on equine education that will serve them in countless areas.

It's not an accident that these particular kids and horses are brought together. It is deliberate. They are not just here to take pony rides. It's an educational opportunity for self-exploration and discovery through learning about and relating to horses. Natural horsemanship can make the feel of life's reins a little less burdensome.

There is a place at the Ranch for every child who can attend, just like there is a place for every temperament of horse. For both, some are drawn out of their shells, while others are surrounded by calm to soothe their anxiety/trepidation or over- excitement. It's a bright place to be, with metaphoric mirrors in all directions. As each day progresses, the discussions and the shared learning, even the patience of waiting, exhibits the evidence of healing taking place through awareness and collaboration. These 8-16 year olds, some with raw edges, who don't have a stable home life, or struggle to keep up with their classmates, have an opportunity to command a magnificent creature, discovering new aspects about themselves in the process. Like some horses, they might have done better together in their original herd, but it just didn't work out that way.

Some students notice similarities and/or differences between how they feel on and off the ranch. Observing herd behavior can bring up situations from their own lives and evoke emotions. Fears are challenged and the kids are empowered to meet them, learning to navigate the system instead of working it. They might not always talk about what goes on inside (well maybe with the horse), but the way they absorb what they are learning, and how they change from week to week shows as they sometimes challenge each other, remind one another about the safety zone around the horse, or the best brush for the face or mane.

Sharing the discoveries of new friendships with horses and with peers, they learn about these relationships together. During one riding session, students watched and cheered a classmate, talking with tremendous empathy about her story. Perhaps some were thinking of their own stories. One student shared that her time at the ranch was the one part of the week she looked forward to. For many it is possibly the only time when they feel in, of, or about something. It's touching to watch a child in need lay down and hug a horse's neck and to reach up from the ground and offer a carrot, even when the child is hungry.

The experiences that have shaped their lives (foster care, adoption, illnesses, homelessness, school difficulties,) can be witnessed in their observations of the herd. Just ask a student what they are thinking when they see one horse bite another on the hindquarters!

The kids get a new perspective from atop a horse where they can feel the support of a gentle, grounded partner that helps nibble away at neglect. Eventually, when the youngsters turn out their horses after riding, instead of watching the horse turn away from them, at some point a seismic shift occurs and the child strides off first, knowing the horse is still there. Their demeanor reveals the majesty that happens on the outside and feels good on the inside.

## **Victory Ranch Partners Up to Serve Bay Area Youth Communities**

Victory Ranch has established long-term relationships and partnerships with the following agencies and organizations: Kinship, Adoptive and Foster Parents Association (KAFPA), Today's Youth Matter, Santa Clara District Attorney's Office, Unity Care (Foster Home), San Mateo County Human Services Agency, Redwood Family Center (Shelter Network), San Mateo County Sheriff's Department, Palo Alto Prep School, For Youth By Youth (FYBY), Ronald McDonald House - Palo Alto, Bill Wilson Center (Santa Clara), and is equipped to extend its programs to others.

## **Victory Ranch Pilot Research Study for At-Risk Kids Quantifies Children's Horsemanship Program Outcomes**

We continue to conduct statistical analysis of observations from the KHEP sessions. A student volunteer from the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology is verifying and validating program outcomes on all participants (students and horses), reflecting the children's development with learning, mood, and behavior. The contributions these children make by allowing us to anonymously quantify their progress and outcomes will enable VR to continue this study throughout the year, and to continue training of the program horses. This is groundbreaking research that validates what Doug and his team already know...that these kids change their behaviors in a positive way through the interaction and connection with their horse buddy. Victory Ranch's goals continue to be reached according to feedback and research analysis. These include: improved self confidence, social and communication skills, personal achievement, ability to focus and follow directions, basic knowledge of horses, and better teamwork. Victory Ranch aims to assure these goals are achieved by the students.

Another Buckaroo Program outcome is the transition of KHEP graduates into volunteers. They give what only a Buckaroo Graduate can give: inside empathy and encouragement to incoming students. As VR graduates demonstrate their boosted self-esteem and team leadership skills, the new students envision future possibilities.

### **From Student to Volunteer; Sharing Learning with Peers**

Throughout the program children begin to notice they are acting differently in their own environments; they have renewed hope and begin to share their growing process by taking on more responsibility when they return as volunteers. These are the kids that talk about leading similar programs later in life. They will give back much in reflection of what they have received. Serving, representing and uplifting these children will be a boon for everyone's future. They will make our world better, ready to fly off to places dreams are made of. And that can be seen from atop a horse, especially through a child's eye.

## **Expansion of Victory Ranch Programs and Volunteering**

After over five years of program development, Victory Ranch is poised to expand, developing new programs for unmet needs that serve local youth and adults throughout 2011 and beyond. Please don't hesitate to contact us if you know a child who can benefit from Victory Ranch programs.

Future programs include: Day Visit, Equine Assisted Learning (EAL); Organizational Team Building,

Veteran's Mentor with KHEP Graduates, SAL through San Mateo County Sheriff's Office/Santa Clara County Sheriff's Office, Equine Arts, Women in Crisis, Challenges of Autism, Physical/Brain Hurdles, Recovery, and Needs of the Elderly.

Volunteer opportunities include: benefit concert support, silent auction organization, social services program development, research study publication, procuring in-kind services/donations, horse/program sponsorships, horse care and handling, exercising and riding, website development, stall and grounds maintenance, event assistance, and grant writing.

## **Join Your Colleagues and Friends Below with Financial Support of Victory Ranch**

The kids and the horses; Dunit, Blackjack, Smokey, Rosie, Trigger, and Sierra are looking for you to help secure and expand this unique program at a small ranch facility in the Woodside/Portola Valley area.

***Help us secure the financial support so we can have our own base of operations and serve more disadvantaged children.***

Foundation and Corporate Sponsors: Dean Witter Foundation, The Morgan Family Foundation, The Harvey L. Sorensen and Maud C. Sorensen Foundation, The Waitte Foundation, Wells Fargo Foundation, The Safeway Foundation, Dixie Trailer Works, Inc., Portola Farms, Inc., B.R. Cohn Winery. Strategic Partners: Troxel Performance Headgear, Ariat International, Almaden Equestrian Center, N.C.E.F.T (National Center for Equine Facilitated Therapy), Mounted Patrol of San Mateo County.

## **Victory Ranch Website Contact Information - [www.victoryranchinc.org](http://www.victoryranchinc.org)**

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