

Passion Project Part A: Final Draft

Hope on Hooves for Incarcerated Youth

“If I had this program when I was 14, I wouldn't be here (locked up) today.”

- Juvenile Hall Inmate (2023)

Wonder Wood Ranch is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization that specializes in Equine therapy with at-risk youth. One of their newer projects is bringing horses into juvenile hall for equine therapy. Through this program, Wonder Wood Ranch has changed many lives through the hearts of horses and people. As the executive horse trainer, I am familiar with this program. The change that I've seen has been absolutely incredible. But why? Why does Equine Therapy work with the trauma-impacted youth in Juvenile Hall? Ultimately, the highly sensitive prey animal that's hyper aware of their surrounding makes emotional recovery possible and learning to care for and handle horses teaches inmates important life skills, both making the transition to freedom more stable

First, it's important to discuss the history of Equine Therapy. The concept of Equine Therapy dates back to 460 BCE in the writings of the Hippocrates. The writing addresses “Hippotherapy”. A term for physical equine therapy that involves the improvement of movement through horse riding. (Newport Academy, Par. 4) Later, in the 1960s, we see a reinvention of Equine Therapy into its modern form through the formation of the Community Association of Riding of the Disabled (The Anxiety Treatment Center, Par. 3) Since then it has skyrocketed in popularity, sparking many different types of therapy.



*Hippotherapy at work at Wonder Wood Ranch
by Executive Director, Marlo Schalesky*

“I’ve been here since the beginning of the program and every Tuesday I’m always looking forward to the program coming to the hall. Whenever I may be having a rough time in here or my mood may be down, the people and the animals always seem to cheer me up and put me in a better mood.” - Juvenile Hall Inmate

Equine Therapy has been proven to be effective in treating trauma-impacted youth. According to “Evaluating the Efficacy of Equine Therapy Among At-risk Youth: A Meta-analysis”, studies have reported an “increase in hope and self-efficacy and reduction of negative affect after youth participated in a 5-week equine therapy program” as well as a “significant decrease in anxiety, negative affect, and undesirable behaviors associated with trauma after experiencing sexual abuse” These studies also found that that youth with mental disorders “benefited from 12 weekly sessions of equine therapy in several domains of adaptive functioning.” (Wilkie, Germain, Theule, 5). Zooming in on specifically incarcerated youth, five studies were conducted among inmates involved in prison-based animal programs. “Two studies reported no recidivism of participants, and three other studies found lower recidivism rates among [prison-based animal program] participants as compared with other inmates.” An equine

facilitated program also reported that “no participants had recidivated for a 4- to 5-year period since beginning a program.” (Bachi, 12). The Wild Mustang Program (WMP) has done the most in-depth studies on recidivism rates. They reported “reduced recidivism rates among 56 male program participants (Cushing & Williams, 1995). Only 25% of participants recidivated versus an average state recidivism rate of 38.12%” (Bachi, 13).

“I like that you bring animals for us. It makes us forget we’re locked up.” --Juvenile Hall Inmate

Besides the several studies done on both animal and specifically equine-facilitated therapy programs, Wonder Wood Ranch has experienced its own success stories. First incarcerated at the young age of 12, after severe domestic abuse in his younger years, one juvenile hall inmate spent his entire teen-age years locked up for various offenses. Labeled a “bad kid” and essentially thrown away by the system, he was finally released as a 17-year-old and came to Wonder Wood Ranch to complete community service hours. Wonder Wood Ranch had been working with him while he was incarcerated in Juvenile Hall, and upon his release enrolled him in the TAILS Training (Equine Therapy) Program in early 2023. A month later, he had received his high school diploma, signed up for Hartnell classes, obtained a good-paying job, joined a church youth group, and continued to volunteer at Wonder Wood Ranch even after his required community service hours were completed. During that time, he led a group of Stanford Alumni in building arena seating for Stanford’s Beyond the Farm annual serve day, led kids on horses during various events at the ranch, volunteered at the ranch’s Tea for Hope fundraiser, and even led a Carr Lake teacher on a horse for her first-ever horseback ride. Today, the inmate is a successful and integral part of life here at Wonder Wood Ranch, serving kids (including

Lewis, a highly autistic 19-year-old in a wheelchair), helping out with various repairs, building projects, programs, and events, and is passionate about partnering with the ranch to reach other formerly-incarcerated youth like himself. Wonder Wood Ranch, being the only program that uses horses in Juvenile Hall in the Country, (Others are only in adult prisons) has countless stories just like this one. Another juvenile hall inmate was expelled, incarcerated, and put on probation for violent outbursts. After trying another program and getting removed due to a violent outburst with the staff, since being involved in the equine therapy program, he is well-adjusted, doing well in school, happy, and has not had a single outburst since. As well as being a regular volunteer at the Ranch!

“When Wonder Wood comes to the juvenile hall to visit us, it makes me feel like a kid again, and it gives me hope that when I get out I’ll have something positive to look forward to on the outside” - Juvenile Hall Inmate

“We appreciate Wonder Wood Ranch coming, rain or shine, to give us new experiences and take us out of our comfort zone to help us be more open-minded and positive” - Juvenile Hall Inmate

There is no doubt that horses have changed the lives of many, but how does this happen? First, it’s important to address the horse as an animal. Horses are prey animals with the fastest reaction time on any land animal, this makes them highly sensitive and emotional. “Evaluating the Efficacy of Equine Therapy Among At-risk Youth: A Meta-analysis” reports that horses are herd animals that are highly attuned to their surroundings and provide immediate feedback to those in their environment. It is this interaction that promotes the change in the client. The horse helps the child to see a reflection of their emotions and actions through the horse. The goal is to

help youth understand, manage, and control their emotions and actions. This personal growth can then positively impact other areas of their life. (Wilkie, Germain, Theule, 4) More specifically with horses and inmates, The Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation, founded in 1983, is a program that brings retired racehorses into prisons. The Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation reports that the horses bring emotional benefits as well as an increase in self-esteem. They say that caring for and learning to trust another being teaches patience, love, and gentle leadership, helping inmates learn more about themselves and the effects of their actions as well as important social skills. (Bachi, 9). Handling horses teaches important life skills such as teamwork, empathy, leadership, patience, dedication, coordination, and more that can build a good foundation for the inmate. Making it harder to relapse into old ways while also setting up an inmate for success in employment and life in general through the skills learned through horses.

“I appreciate how Wonder Wood Ranch comes to give us comfort and peace and lets us know that whatever we go through in life, we can get through it. There’s light in the darkness.

- Juvenile Hall Inmate

I, myself have witnessed these very skills being developed through the programs at Wonder Wood Ranch. Kids who were deemed hopeless are now employed and out in the real world. Using the skills that horses (and the program) taught them. Through our TAILS training program, we further the support after Juvenile Hall, easing them into regular life and continuing to foster the relationship that we’ve built whilst also continuing to teach important life skills through horses. Horses open the door to new opportunities, hope, and success, there is no doubt about it!

“I like the program because it gets my mind off my situation and gives me hope”

- Juvenile Hall Inmate

“I feel good when I’m around the animals. I forget the hard things in my past and have hope for the future” - Juvenile Hall Inmate

“Riding the horses makes me feel free!” - Juvenile Hall Inmate

Works Cited

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Passion Project Part B

[Equine Therapy in Juvenile Hall Podcast](#)

