When the friend who has your back is a horse

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When the friend who has your back is a horse

Kristie Stokes sits high and proud on the back of a 1,000-pound horse named Melody. Stokes holds the reins and follows a course set by her instructor, who offers instructions and encouragement. Melody walks on and Stokes talks to Melody.

"She's a sweetheart," says Stokes. "And she listens to me."

Stokes, who has special needs, sees Melody each week at Dream Catchers, a therapeutic horseback riding center in James City County, Virginia. The ranch specializes in helping people through riding. It is structured around programs for speech therapy and mental health. For the last three years, Stokes visited the 22-acre ranch for the physical and mental benefits of horsemanship. Experts say those benefits come out of trust that is built between horse and rider.

Dream Catchers is one of a growing number of therapeutic riding centers across the country. Therapeutic means that the center is focused on healing and treating conditions. The center has
Cher Smith is the communications coordinator for the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International. She says the relationship between a person and a horse can empower, teach, build trust with and help heal participants.

"When you come to that animal with all of your junk, with all of your past issues, with who you are physically, that horse doesn't care," says Smith. "What he cares about is, can I trust you?"

**A Beginning With Nurses**

Dream Catchers began at the Cumberland Children's Hospital in New Kent County, Virginia. A group of nurses who realized the healing value of working with horses started the program. It moved to the Cori Sikich Therapeutic Riding Center in 2004.

The ranch is a collection of barns, fences and pastures. It has a full staff and almost 300 volunteers. Around 80 to 100 participants visit each week, says Executive Director Janet Mayberry.

The program's 15 horses and two therapy dogs all required careful selection, says Mayberry. Not every horse can be a therapy horse. It takes the right mix of personality and physical features – a blend of patience, sensitivity and steadiness.

When Rhonda Hamlin, a mental health expert, works with new clients, she says she first takes them to the pasture and lets them watch the animals. Often, she says, a horse will come near, greeting a participant's outreached hand near its nose – a "horse handshake." Somehow, she says, horse and rider choose each other.

Dream Catchers has breeds ranging from miniature horses to medium-sized Welsh ponies to large draft horses like Melody. A physical connection matters because a horse's walk resembles a human's, says Mayberry. That resemblance helps a participant build core strength and improve posture.

Once a rider finds his or her horse, it's all about growing their relationship.

**Courses With Cones And Poles**

Stokes takes Melody around the barn, weaving through cones and stepping over poles. A trainer guides the riders over a loudspeaker, while volunteers walk with the riders for safety. Melody responds to Stokes' commands.

Instructor Samantha Bannock says the courses may look like a simple arrangement of cones and poles, but they're more than a pony ride. Trainers can quickly adjust based on a rider's needs, changing the speed, position on the horse or maneuvers. Progress isn't always quick, she says, but instructors can push participants to build their confidence and trust over time.
"They [horses] can pick up or perceive a person's feelings or emotions even before the person themselves kind of acknowledges [them]," says Hamlin. "So in a very rudimentary sense, I can use them as a barometer and know immediately what's happening with a [participant] just by watching what the horse does."

Horses are prey animals, which means they're extremely sensitive to their environment. That enhanced perception also requires participants to be honest, says Hamlin. If a rider presents himself or herself one way but is feeling another, the horse will stay away.

**In The Present**

Unlike a human, who may hold a grudge, horses remain in the present, says Hamlin. That quality allows riders to feel accepted more easily by horses than by humans, she says. Whenever participants make a mistake, she reminds them that the horses will always be willing to start over.

The same attitude is required of riders. Before Stokes came to Dream Catchers, her mother, Karen, says she rode at a different program. Several years ago Kristie fell from a horse and seriously injured her knee, says Karen. However, when Kristie came to Dream Catchers, she didn't hesitate to keep riding, her mother says.

"It's not an easy thing to get up on that horse and ride. It can be terrifying," says Mayberry. "So it requires trust in the people that you're working with and strength of character."

Karen Stokes says she sees the change in her daughter when they come to the ranch. Kristie smiles more, talks more and parades around her confidence.

According to Karen, Kristie "engages with the horse. She talks to this horse. They have such a great relationship. She's in control of the situation."