



The Mini Horses that Heal

Posted by [Eve Marx](#)

“We were at an event in San Pedro and a man whose son suffers from multiple disabilities – the boy doesn’t speak, he’s not mobile, he has to be strapped into his chair. In the midst of all this commotion my miniature horse Liberty Belle noticed the boy and she went right up to him. She brought her head to his.

“They immediately went into their own private world. Belle, as we call her, knew what this child needed. I wasn’t holding her. The child pressed his face right next to hers and she never moved her head. Gradually, all around us, people stopped talking. Everyone was mesmerized. The connection between this child and this horse transcended everything else happening close by. They stayed like that a long time. I was so proud of Belle. To witness the total healing connection between a person and these little horses is so unique, so profound. This is what I live for.”

These are the words of Victoria Nodiff-Netanel , founder of Mini Therapy Horses (www.minitherapyhorses.com), a non-profit, all volunteer organization based in southern California in the hills of Malibu. (That’s Victoria, above, with Steve Sullivan, vice president and co-founder, and two of the magical minis: Black Pearl, left, and Blue Moon, right.) Through partnerships with law enforcement agencies as well as children’s and veteran’s organizations

including Ronald McDonald House, the Greater Los Angeles Veterans Hospital, the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, and the Los Angeles Mayor's Crisis Response team, Mini Therapy Horses are certified first responders providing equine-assisted interactions to people and groups in need of comfort and relief.

After a single encounter with a tiny horse, human beings of all ages have smiled and spoken for the first time after their traumatic experience.

"We visit people in need and crisis outside of our core programming, such as patients in ICU, at-risk youth, people with disabilities, rape victims, and children at orphanages," Victoria says. "It's always about the horse and helping the person make the connection with the horse. They help many people and provide them with hope."

She's been doing this work for eight years. Her band of mini horses – Black Pearl, Willow Blue, Liberty Belle, American Valor, Blue Moon, Sweet Louise, and Bluebell – are highly trained for their work. They are small but mighty, between 27" and 29 inches at the withers. That means they're much smaller than dogs like, say, a Great Dane.

"My horses are little princes and princesses," says Victoria, a veteran horsewoman. "They are very loved and respected. Working in collaboration with the horse, we make ourselves emotionally available in every way to the person. It's about opening our hearts and helping the person make a connection with the horse."

The human/equine connection, she said, is always genuine and instinctive. "It transcends whatever that person is going through and having this incredible experience of normalcy. Sometimes the person will talk to the horse. They'll share something they would not share with a human. With the horse, they're willing to open up. Opening the mind and heart is an initial step back into the world."

Victoria tells a story about a little boy named Justin she met at a Ronald McDonald House. "I always bring little stuffed horses for keepsakes," she says. "Justin had a very rare brain tumor. He was in a wheelchair. He had a trach and his chest was all wired up. But he still came out of his room because he wanted to see American Valor. The horse just put his head right into this child's lap. Justin is doing really well now, but it's a miracle. The child has been through so much and he's had so much treatment. It was very emotional to see him get to a place where he was up and walking. One day he was able to walk alongside and lead the horse. Being able to do this was a goal for him, and he reached it."

Another memorable visit, she says, was with a young man she met at the L.A. Ronald McDonald House. "I don't know what happened to him, but he has one leg and no hands. Both arms end just below the elbow. He loves the horses so much. When we come, he comes out and helps carry in all our stuff! The first time we met, when I opened my bag of stuffed horses, he chose a white unicorn with a pink horn. I think he's about 17 years old, but he picked out this little unicorn! He helps out so much with the younger kids. He's become part of the healing process. I always think about him and how even with all his disabilities, he always carries in the bag of toys."

Mini Therapy Horses relies solely on donations. For more information how to donate or volunteer, visit www.minitherapyhorses.com.