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By Tom Peeling / Special to The Palm Beach Post

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‘You can feel their empathy’: How horses are helping combat the drug addiction issue

DELRAY BEACH – A treatment center and a non-profit group combined recently to show how horses could help with drug rehab.

But this was more than just a drug and pony show.

It was a chance for some of those who had survived addiction to tell their stories of how horses helped them overcome. It’s not just the drug users who need help. Sometimes the children of addicts need help coping, too. That’s where Horses Healing Hearts comes into play at Tara Farm’s Delray Beach stables.

And that’s also where you’ll find 20-year-old Tiffany Vanhille, a Delray Beach native. About eight years ago, Vanhille, a 7th grader, was at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting with her mom when she saw a person there in horse garb. She had ridden horses from a very young age, and this person fascinated her.

That’s how Vanhille connected with Horses Healing Hearts.

“My mother was an addict,” Vanhille says. “When she relapsed, she would leave,” at one point for as long as three years at a time. Her mother’s been sober for three years now, she adds.

Vanhille considers herself fortunate that she was never involved in drugs or alcohol considering her mother’s situation and her father, who at one time abused alcohol. She credits the horses with helping her.

“Because of this program, I learned all the life-coping skills,” she says.

Kids come into the program and meet for 45 minutes each time, learning those coping skills. Then they get to ride the horses. Horses want to comfort the kids, Vanhille says.

"A lot of kids here get bullied. Some kids won't tell you what is going on, but will tell the horse," Vanhille adds, and "they won't ever tell your secrets."

But the horses are there to help the addicts too. Just ask Jenna Moore, 33. She was in rehab three times in the Lancaster area of Pennsylvania. The first two times didn't take, but the third 31-day stay was the charm. This time she went through the program at Retreat Behavioral Health in Ephrata, Pa. Retreat now has a center in the suburban [Lake Worth](#) area, and Moore is the group's national event planner.

Retreat uses horses in their drug therapy program in Pennsylvania, and now in Florida. Retreat and the horses helped Moore immensely, she says, adding that she was a late-bloomer, not using drugs until she was 24.

"I felt like a person going through treatment," she says. "I didn't feel like a low-life junkie."

Moore says you can't hide your feelings from horses. They sense it. You can feel the empathy of the horses, she says.

She was at the point in her life where she'd wake up in the morning and say "this again?" She didn't feel like she had much to live for.

"I was blessed. I never overdosed," she says, adding that her mother was the one who pushed her into treatment.

Peter Schorr, president and founder of Retreat, says the company has its own therapy horses in Pennsylvania, but in this more urban setting they use the Horses Healing Hearts horses and therapists.

The opioid epidemic is worse than anything he's ever seen, Schorr says, adding that his company has treated more than 25,000 patients in less than eight years.

"The No. 1 killer for 50 and under is drug overdoses," he says. "We don't just look for keeping people clean and sober. We keep them alive."

A lot of women who come to them have trust issues, Schorr says. The horses can help with that.

What's it all about to him?

"To watch people come in beaten and battered ... then do great things."