

ANIMALS THAT HEAL

Across Charlotte, therapists are turning to horses and dogs to help patients young and old

BY BETH HOWARD

Veronica Skoczek riding Zipper at a competition in South Carolina

ERICA ANNE DE FLAMAND

ERICA ANNE DE FLAMAND (2); PETER TAYLOR (2); COURTESY PRESBYTERIAN HEALTHCARE; COURTESY WANDA KOCH / FLASHES OF HOPE

Clockwise from left: Tracy Byrnes with Clyde, a Norwegian Fjord at Triple Play Farm; Veronica Skoczek with parents Anna and Norbert; Tucker Summerville's sheltie, Windi, with patient Paris Burris at Levine Children's Hospital; Mercedes Carmichael with golden retriever Gov; Lila, a retriever/Australian shepherd mix at the Center for Creativity and Healing; and Kathy and Alex Crisp with golden retriever Camden.



Our pets are our companions,

playmates, and confidantes, acting in almost every way like the family members we expect them to be. It's no surprise that the bonds go so deep: animals lower blood pressure, reduce harmful stress hormones, and raise levels of the neurochemical oxytocin, the same chemical produced by breastfeeding women that promotes feelings of contentment.

The physiological effects of animals are only some of the obvious ways they can boost human health. Animal-assisted activities such as therapeutic horseback riding and pet therapy programs are flourishing. These methods aren't just feel-good adjuncts to conventional treatments for physical and emotional woes; they are effective approaches in their own right. Proponents say health-focused human-animal encounters can speed healing or trigger breakthroughs where other efforts fall short. No wonder more area providers and therapists are using animals to help patients work through painful emotions, endure difficult medical procedures, or push the limits of their disabilities.



Veronica (left) and volunteer Annette Nikonovich lead Casey, an Arabian/Quarter Horse cross, back to her pasture after a riding session.

Fifteen-year-old

Veronica Skoczek sits tall in her saddle as she grabs the reins of her favorite pony, MacGuyver, and firmly commands the brown Connemara-Thoroughbred cross horse forward. With a subtle tug on the right rein, then a pull on the left, she guides him around a series of barrels. A verbal click and a squeeze of her thighs propel him into a trot, and Veronica's face beams as she moves gracefully around the ring. Her dark locks pulled into a ponytail under her riding helmet, she looks just like any other horse-crazy teenager in the saddle on a warm spring day.

When she dismounts with the help of her instructor, however, the difference between her and other girls is obvious. The South Charlotte teen was born with cerebral palsy. Her long limbs bend awkwardly and her short walk back into the barn is halting.

Yet she celebrates every step. Before she began riding horses with Mitey Riders, a therapeutic riding program at Misty Meadows Farm near Waxhaw, she could barely walk on her own and was dependent on a walker. "Doctors told us that she might even need a wheelchair to get around when she was a teenager," says Anna Skoczek, Veronica's mother. After several years of riding, however, Veronica's gait is getting better and better—no walker or wheelchair needed.

The reason horses make good physical therapists is that the rhythmic pattern of the animal's gait mimics the human gait and stimulates nerves in ways that promote better alignment, muscle symmetry, and postural control. Therapeutic riding has been shown to help riders with several disabilities, including multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, and cerebral palsy.

"Veronica used to fall all the time at school. The children called her a bouncy ball because she was always going up and down," says Anna. "But after she started riding, we saw a huge difference." Being in the saddle strengthens a rider's core muscles, allowing the teen to sit tall on and off the horse. And each time she takes the horse's reins, her tight leg and arm muscles relax, allowing her to master the careful moves that tell the horse where to go and what to do. That's translated into greater control of her own movement.

So much better control, in fact, that three years ago, Veronica's Mitey Riders instructors decided she might be ready to enter a horse show at Fox Point Farm in Fort Mill—one geared toward her more able-bodied peers. "We were there just to have fun and see how it looks on 'the other side,'" says Anna. Veronica did that and more, taking home a blue ribbon—the top spot—in one of the classes. No one but her family and the Mitey Riders crew—not the other participants, the spectators, or the judge—ever knew that the strong girl on the brown horse had a disability.

"I didn't care if I won any ribbons," Veronica says. "But when I did, it was very joyful for me. I feel powerful when I am riding."



ERICA ANNE DE FLAMAND

When Pam Guion

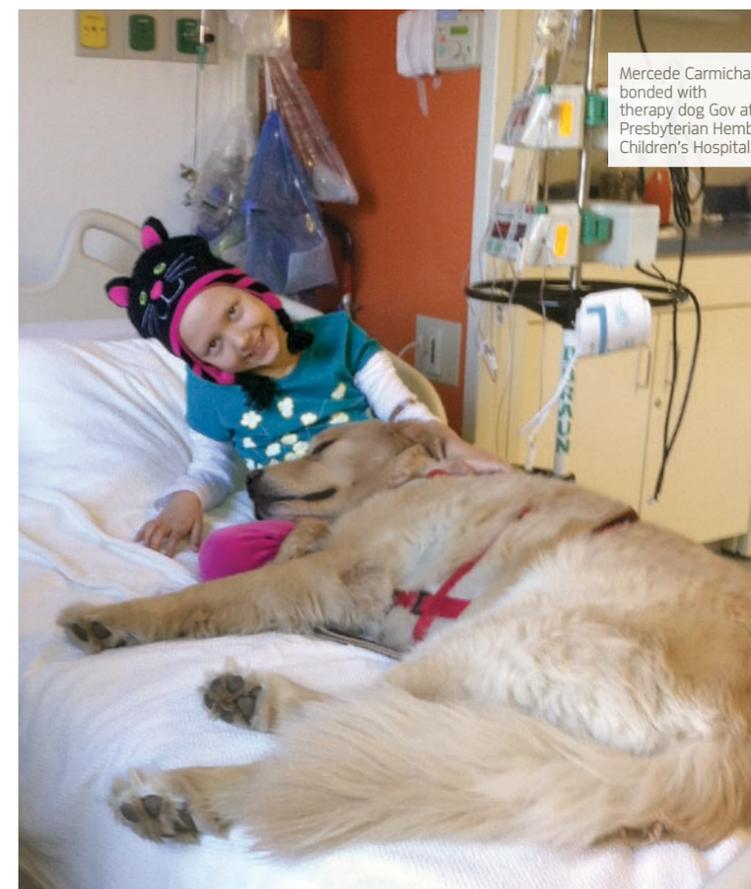
and her large golden retriever, Governor Dewey, walk down the corridor at Presbyterian Hemby Children's Hospital, they set off a cascade of happy squeals as they pass each open door. *Gov is here!* When the pair approaches a small girl in a stroller, the dog sits down in front of her, letting her bury her head in his just-washed fur. Guion and Gov move on, stepping into a room where a girl is being helped from her hospital bed into a chair to pet the dog. When Guion gently places Gov's head in the girl's lap, a nurse suggests she use her weak left hand to stroke his head and ears—a ploy to slip in a little physical therapy.

Several therapy dogs forged a bond with Mercede Carmichael, called Cede, who was admitted to Presbyterian with leukemia in 2011 and died there on

February 13, after nine grueling months of chemotherapy. "She would wait for dog day," says her mother, Melissa. "It's what got her through." On days when she felt so ill that she didn't leave her bed all day, the nine-year-old would still manage to get up to greet her furry friends. She even dressed up as "Beast," a Great Pyrenees, at the hospital's Halloween party last year.

But it was Gov with whom she really connected. "He would immediately drag Pam to [Cede's] door, before they had even checked in with the main office," says Melissa. "He would get in bed with her and just lay there for the longest time. They had an amazing bond. It's hard to describe, but when he walked in the room, Cede left the world of childhood cancer and was just a girl with a dog. It took her mind off of things that no child should have to go through." The Carmichaels paid tribute to the special role the dogs played in Cede's treatment by seating them in the front row at her celebration of life service.

"It took her mind off of things that no child should have to go through."



Mercede Carmichael bonded with therapy dog Gov at Presbyterian Hemby Children's Hospital.

COURTESY PRESBYTERIAN HEALTHCARE

Animal therapy teams make a big commitment to be in the hospital. Potential volunteers must submit to background checks, and their pets undergo training and licensing through organizations such as Therapy Dogs International (TDI), which is responsible for millions of animal therapy visits nationally. Dogs are taught where to place their heads to be massaged by small hands and how to maneuver around IVs and medical equipment. They also learn to avoid licking and to tolerate abrupt motions and loud noises. There's a waiting list of people—and pets—who want to participate in this program and in a similar one at Levine Children's Hospital.

Guion, a retired elementary teacher, had always wanted to be a nurse. Having a therapy dog has been the next best thing in her life's second act. "It's the best feeling in the world when a parent tells you that you made their child smile for the first time that day," she says.

At Davidson's Triple Play Farm, horses like these Norwegian Fjords Monarch and Kasper help people cope with psychological issues.



Pacing the stable

at Triple Play Farm in Davidson, the client, a young man in his teens, is grappling with his assigned task—picking a horse to work with in his session with psychotherapist Annie Seier. His goal is to learn to cope with severe anxiety, which is getting in the way of his relationships at home and school. He finally settles on Clyde, one of the barn's three Norwegian Fjords, a particularly even-tempered breed. Kris Batchelor, Triple Play's owner, leads the horse to a large, open pen, and, for twenty minutes, Seier teaches the teen different techniques to manage the fear that spikes each time he takes a step closer to the animal.

Suddenly Clyde drops his head and tries to circle in the way horses do just before they fold their legs beneath themselves to lie down. His 1200 pounds slump to the ground with a puff of dust just steps away from the boy. Clyde sits perfectly still like a gigantic cat, his only movement the steady blinking of his eyes.

"As animals of prey, horses choose to lie down only when they feel absolutely safe," Batchelor tells the teen. When Seier asks him what he thinks about that—the horse judged him to be nonthreatening and made himself vulnerable—the boy is emboldened. He inches forward, tentatively placing a hand on Clyde's neck, then scoots back to where he had been standing. The day's take-home: unless someone takes a risk in a relationship, nothing ever changes. "A horse gave him insight that he might never have gained through talk therapy," Batchelor says.

In fact, the dynamic between horses and humans offers a unique approach to psychological issues. Horses are wired to detect danger. "They take cues from your body language and can even hear your heartbeat if you're very close," says Batchelor. As a result, horses tend to mirror the ways that people behave toward them, providing individuals a window into their own thoughts and actions. Approach them with aggression and horses dig in their hooves. Not feeling too sure of yourself? They pick up on that and shy away. Horses are honest that way.

"As clients begin to build a relationship with the animal, they start to connect the dots," Batchelor says. "In essence, horses are thousand-pound feedback machines."

Batchelor first observed the healing power of horses when she was volunteering at Hinds' Feet Farm, a residential- and day-program facility for people with traumatic brain injury in Huntersville. She was working with a woman who'd suffered a brain injury in a car accident that had also killed her sister. Despite the staff's efforts to get her to speak about the event, the woman was unable to open up. But then she was invited to braid the mane of a mare. "Something about the motor activity of the braiding and the horse's presence reminded her of braiding her sister's hair before bed each night," Batchelor says. That sparked the breakthrough the woman needed to confront the tragedy. "I thought, 'Wow, a horse did that,'" Batchelor says.

"In essence, horses are thousand-pound feedback machines."

ERICA ANNE DE FLAMAND



Camden, who is trained to help people deal with physical or emotional issues, is nine-year-old Alex Crisp's constant companion.

Some animals

just seem born to nurture. Case in point: Camden, the service dog of nine-year-old Alex Crisp, who is confined to a wheelchair. Alex's parents, Kathy and Matt Crisp (Matt is also in a wheelchair as the result of a car accident), first suspected there was something wrong with their infant son when he failed to develop muscle control or the ability to track objects with his eyes. Over the next two years, Alex developed a slew of other problems, including constant

Camden is also integral to Alex's therapy. When it's time for a game of catch, the dog drops a ball in Alex's lap and then waits patiently as Alex focuses, finally grasps the ball, and then flings it back to his friend—over and over again.

Kathy says the emotional bond between boy and dog has meant more to the family than the tricks that Camden can perform. When Alex was in the hospital for forty-four days last spring—a procedure

He seemed to know that Alex needed extra comfort during blood draws or cuddling to fall asleep.

involuntary movements and seizures, and was eventually diagnosed with mitochondrial disease, a malfunction of the mitochondria—the "energy factories" of the body's cells. Alex needs around-the-clock care and faces a host of medical problems that require frequent doctor and hospital visits.

Three years ago, the Crisps, who live in Charlotte, heard about paws4people, a Wilmington-based organization through which prison inmates train puppies, which are then matched with people with physical and emotional challenges. After Camden and Alex clicked in an informal meet-and-greet—paws4people calls it a "bump"—the golden retriever got additional training for the family's specific needs, including tasks such as turning lights off and on and throwing away trash.

to insert a new feeding tube went awry, leading to numerous complications—Camden was Alex's constant companion. He seemed to know that Alex needed extra comfort during blood draws or cuddling to fall asleep.

Outside the hospital, Camden plays another important role—bridging the social gap between Alex, who can't speak well or focus his eyes, and other kids. "People see the boy with the cool dog," says Kathy. "It helps children accept Alex."

Pictures from Alex's vacation bible school last summer tell that story: kids clustered around Alex's wheelchair, holding his hand, petting Camden. "They danced with him, played in the water with him, prayed with him, and sang songs with him," Kathy says. "He was in seventh heaven."

COURTESY KATHY CRISP



Bit of Hope Ranch's Meg Vanderbilt works with client Deana Romero, eleven, on bonding and connecting with Lilly, a therapy horse.

All the girl wants

to do is ride. But first, she has to get the horse on board, and Lilly, a massive quarter horse, is having nothing to do with it. The girl, thirteen, has a history of abuse and has been in and out of foster homes. She's managed to get herself kicked out of three in the last year alone. Today is one of her first sessions at Bit of Hope Ranch in Gastonia, which focuses on kids who bear the scars of abuse and neglect, as well as those diagnosed with autism, attachment and panic disorders, and ADHD. The horses at Bit of Hope have their own issues—all are rescues and some have experienced trauma themselves. Lilly's former owners had beaten her with a baseball bat.

Putting an excitable or aggressive kid on a horse with trust issues may sound like a dubious idea, but it can be highly therapeutic, says Meg Vanderbilt, the ranch's cofounder. "When a kid's energy is too high, Lilly lets them know it," she says. "The child has to figure out what they need to do in their body to get calmer and connect with the horse." Equine specialists are on hand to keep the encounter safe.

As a part of the learning experience, at-risk kids are asked to go into the arena and try to get the horse to come to them. But every time the girl gets close to Lilly, the animal takes off running. Finally the girl throws a tantrum and tosses her rope on the ground, ending the session.

When she returns the following week, however, she gets a second chance. This time, Vanderbilt suggests that she sit quietly at the center of the arena. Ten long minutes pass. Lilly finally edges over and gently nudges the girl's shoulder with her nose. "She's now giving you permission to catch her. She feels like she can trust you," Vanderbilt told the girl. It's a life lesson in self-control. "It helped her learn that you can't make others do what you want them to do, no matter how much you might like it," says Vanderbilt.

There's some thought that the repetitive, rhythmic movement of a horse also helps normalize brain function and the ability to process sensory information. Challenging life circumstances, such as early abuse, can disrupt neurological development, making children anxious and exaggerating their reactions to stress. "The walking rhythm of riding a horse bareback seems to help get a child's brain to a lower arousal state and less reactionary," Vanderbilt says.

The horses also benefit from the ranch's program. "Our mission is to restore broken families—and horses," Vanderbilt says. "After Lilly got here, she was so shy and mistrusting, it took forever to be able to put a saddle on her. Since then we've taught her a few tricks. Now she actually gets a little cocky when she's doing them."

PETER TAYLOR

Maria Curran works with her therapy dog Lila and client Kaylee Galloway, nine, at the offices of Charlotte's Center for Creativity and Healing.



The offices of

the Center for Creativity and Healing, a counseling practice on Park Road in Charlotte, boast colorful mobiles, a playroom, and artwork on every wall. If these don't brighten your mood, there's the welcoming presence of Lila, a black-and-white golden retriever/Australian shepherd mix. "I see a lot of anxious kids," explains the center's director, psychologist Maria Curran, Ph.D. "Lila helps break the ice, especially if it is a new client. She has a stress-

The dog had been thrown from a moving car when she was six weeks old.

reducing effect."

Curran adopted Lila from the pound seven years ago. The dog had been thrown from a moving car when she was six weeks old. One of her eyes is damaged, likely as a result of that unthinkable act. (The driver got off with a fine.) But the trauma seems to have endowed the dog with particular sensitivity to troubled souls. "If someone becomes emotional and starts to cry, she will get up and come over and put her chin on the sofa next to them or on their knee," Curran says. "Sometimes she just sits and watches clients very attentively to make sure they're going to be OK."

PETER TAYLOR

Having a dog in therapy sessions appears particularly useful with children. "I see a lot of kids who need help identifying their own feelings and learning to be observant and read social cues," Curran says. "Dogs have their own social cues. Her lying down and raising her leg for a belly scratch is a great way for me to point out to kids, 'See, she wants you to pet her.' Or 'See how she's wagging her tail? That means she is glad to see you.'"

Lila, who is certified by TDI, also helps Curran teach children to assert themselves. "Some kids don't know how to set limits with their peers," Curran says. But getting Lila to respond to commands, such as jumping through a hula hoop, requires a firm voice. "Kids get practice at making themselves be heard," Curran says.

In addition to animal therapy, Curran uses art therapy and play therapy, a type of counseling based on the premise that play is a child's most natural means of expression. Lila often plays a central role in the dramas that children create in the healing processes. "She's been a caped 'superdog,' has worn a tiara and sunglasses, and was once kidnapped and locked up by an evil queen," Curran says. "She's very accommodating." 🐾

Email: editor@charlottemagazine.com, or comment online. Beth Howard is a Charlotte freelance writer whose work has appeared in *Reader's Digest*, *US News & World Report*, and *Prevention*.