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Spotlight on the Equine Touch

Horse Care, Naturally, Every First Tuesday



By Mandy Shelton

On the first Tuesday of every month, starting at around 2PM, horse trailers begin arriving at the Sheriff's Posse Arena in Georgetown, TX. Over the course of the afternoon and well into the evening, approximately 20 horses and their human friends will take part in the First Tuesday Holistic Horse Care Clinic.

"It's an educational opportunity for horse owners and lovers," said Paula Cable, who provides equine massages at the clinic. The back window of her truck advertises

massage therapy for horses, humans, and dogs. She says the largest clinic included 38 participants, but tonight they have only 16. "Attendees range from kids with their first pony to barrel-racers and team-ropers, to hunter/jumpers and ex-racehorses," says Cable.

The equine experts at the clinic are advocates of holistic healthcare practices for horses, which can be both preventative and responsive. Among the treatments available are dentistry, chiropractic, osteopathy, acupressure, Equine Touch, and massage therapy, not to mention advice on hoof care, saddle fit, and nutrition. Rather than opposing traditional horse care, holistic healing methods seek to treat the whole horse by eradicating the cause of a problem and not just the symptoms.

Sometimes, the horse owners come to the clinics simply to avoid problems. "I just do this for maintenance," says Claudia Schaffin, owner of a red dun horse she calls Dunny. At eight years old, Dunny is at the prime of his life, equivalent to a 25-year-old person, says Schaffin. Dunny competes in several rodeo events, and Schaffin brings him to the clinic to keep him running his best.



Jamie Shelton performing Equine Touch

Another clinic patient, Gold Dust, gravitates toward a slower pace of life. He and Terri Dolan prefer trail riding, an escape to nature which Dolan says is "very stress-relieving". Certain riding demands, however, were not as stress-free for Gold Dust, such as when Dolan would ask him to make a bending motion while cantering.

"He has a real nice way of telling me that something doesn't feel good - it's sort of a refusal," says Dolan. Gold Dust would turn his head to indicate that he was hurting at the base of his spine, the pain resulting from problems with his sacrum. Dolan, who has retired from her job with the University of Texas and now pursues her passion for horse-riding full-time, brings Gold Dust to the clinics for regular treatments of Equine Touch and massage. "Part of the reason for coming on a regular basis is to not let it get too far gone," says Dolan. "This is a good opportunity to get expert help all in one place at one time."

In the center of the arena, Madalyn Ward, DVM is getting acquainted with an eleven-year-old named Frank. Dr. Ward will work with each one of the equine visitors to the clinic, staying as late as she needs to for everyone to get treated. At the moment, her attentions are on Frank, who is anchored on a lead rope by his favorite rider, Bethany Romero.

As Dr. Ward runs her hands over Frank's left side, she looks across his swayed back to Jocelyn Romero, Bethany's mom. The two horse-lovers carry on a conversation about Frank's habits and problems, all the while turning slow circles with Frank as he pulls away from Dr. Ward's touch. As she listens to Frank's history, Dr. Ward's hands are performing equine osteopathy on him.

"The bones of a horse tell a story, and the osteopath tries to follow that story," Dr. Ward explains. She is focusing her cranial sacral technique on Frank's connective tissues. "As I'm releasing those adhesions, toxins are being released and it burns a little," she says.

Frank is not really in pain, but the sensation is uncomfortable, so he backs away. Dr. Ward's hands stay put, and she, Frank, and Jocelyn Romero keep moving in a circle.

A product of Texas A&M veterinary school, Dr. Ward practiced traditional medicine for ten years before seeking out alternative ways of healing her patients. Her book on the subject, *Holistic Horsekeeping*, was published last fall, which is not to say that she has abandoned everything she learned at vet school. "She's never been one to say 'hey, don't do that,' even on the non-holistic side," says Courtney Adair. "She's a vet - she knows the holistic stuff takes a while to work."



Shay Davis explains her horse Tarra's problems to Dr. Madalyn Ward.

Adair has come to the clinic with Splash, who is suffering an unfortunate hairstyle inflicted upon him by Adair's daughter, Mykayla Lockhart, also in attendance. As Splash looks on from beneath a ponytail positioned squarely on his forehead, Adair admits that she was originally skeptical of the holistic process.

"Oh yeah, that was my first experience with holistic horse care," she says, recalling the premiere First Tuesday Clinic nearly three years ago. Adair says she came to that first clinic because of a certificate that had been donated to the Texas High School Rodeo Association. "I had heard of Madalyn, but I had never used her." Since then, Adair has brought nine different horses to the clinic, and recommended it to her friend Rebecca Boyd.

Boyd and her daughter Brooke are recent additions to the free clinics, having only started bringing their horse Beau two months ago. Beau has problems with his lower back and also suffers from TMJ. "I heard about it, and I was skeptical," Boyd admits. "I was thinking, what kind of doctors or equine people were here giving their time up?"

At the clinic two months ago, however, Boyd was called away for a family emergency and had to leave Beau at the clinic in the care of Adair.

"When we left, we didn't know they were going to see Beau," says Boyd. The next morning, Brooke went to ride Beau and called out - "Mom, Beau's back to normal!" The Boyds later learned that Beau had received treatment from both Dr. Ward and Jamie Shelton, a practitioner of Equine Touch.

What looks like a bunch of soft flicking motions is actually the Equine Touch technique. ET is a non-invasive, non-diagnostic method of helping the horse rebalance and heal, naturally. "It helps the body help itself," explains Shelton.



Dr. Madalyn Ward working on Magnum

At the end of the night, Dr. Ward and several of the clinic's attendees gather for a quick meal at the local Chili's while the horses wait outside in their trailers. The teenagers, Brooke and Mykayla, sit at a separate table nearby to look over a homework assignment for Wednesday morning's English class.

At the big table, everyone is tired but happy: these are horse people, and they've just devoted an entire evening to equine care. Dr. Ward sits quietly in a chair at the end, calmly and methodically answering the questions that are fired her way.

Everyone is worried about Frank, and Dr. Ward explains some of the techniques she used to help him along the road to recovery. No sooner has she said her piece, then the rest of the group chimes in: Jamie sees Frank's problems from the Equine Touch perspective, Paula approaches the issue as a massage therapist.

Everyone quiets down again as Dr. Ward answers one more question before she heads home: what made her start the free clinic? "I wanted to create a learning environment," she says, "to expose people to holistic and natural care for their horses."

For horses like Beau, who demonstrated results after his first trip to the clinic, holistic care immediately seems like a good strategy. Similarly, Gold Dust and Dunny have already shown the transformative effects and are brought back every month so they can keep performing.

Frank, however, will need continuous treatment in order to work through his tangle of problems. It only seems fitting that, in her book, Dr. Ward describes holistic medicine as "an approach which looks at each patient as an individual." At the First Tuesday Free Clinic every month, Frank will no doubt get the attention he needs, from an entire network of healing hands.

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her time covering the local high school sports scene. A version of this article originally appeared in the Williamson County Sun. mandyjoshelton@yahoo.com.

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