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Horses Help Heal Grieving Children

By Karolyn A. Gazella, Executive Director of Medicine Horse Program

Gunshot. Car accident. Cancer. Suicide. The death of a loved one is a devastating and life-changing event. It can be even more complex and traumatic for a young child.

According to Jennifer Trinkle, *Healing Circles* Program Coordinator with HospiceCare of Boulder and Broomfield Counties, although children go through loss and grief just as adults do, they experience grief differently. “Grieving children and teens often feel isolated and disoriented during a very difficult period of their young lives,” explains Jennifer, who is a child grief expert. “Our program helps youth adjust to a new life without the person who has died.”

In 2006, HospiceCare joined forces with the Medicine Horse Program to enlist the healing power of horses. The goal was to utilize this innovative, creative therapy to help grieving kids process their feelings. As a result, *Healing With Horses* was born. After witnessing a profound experience in the first pilot class, *Healing with Horses* has since been expanded. This summer, Medicine Horse will offer two different *Healing With Horses* special events to broaden its reach among different aged children and older teens. Last year, Medicine Horse Program won the prestigious NOVA Award for Health and Human Services through the Boulder Community Foundation for their unique *Healing With Horses* program.

“The horses are amazing,” explains therapist and Medicine Horse Assistant Program Director Calyn Acebes. “They help carry the grief and create a safe space for the kids to express their feelings.”

The class begins with the kids sitting on hay bales in a circle. Each person takes a stone from the center of the circle, places it next to a candle, and says the name of their loved one and how they died. We honor loved ones and invite them into the process. Horse activities can include simple tasks like haltering and grooming, or more involved

activities such as an obstacle course. The kids will often ride the horses while the horses are being led and while the horse stands still they may even lay back on the horse gazing up at the sky feeling a sense of accomplishment and connection with their horse. At the end of the class, each child walks alone with their horse to share a private thought or feeling. Saying “good bye” is important for these children.

The *Healing With Horses* classes are co-facilitated by a Medicine Horse Equine Therapist and a HospiceCare Grief Counselor. Horse Handlers in the classes are required to go through special grief training, as well as Medicine Horse training. As for the horses, they seem to have an innate, specialized talent for this work. It’s an inner wisdom that they are more than willing to share.

“I have seen the exact same horse act completely different with one of our repeat juvenile offenders versus one of our grieving children,” explains Calyn. “The horse knows far more than we will ever realize and they seem to quickly understand what the child needs. They become the wise leaders in our classes.”

On June 15, from 9 am until noon, there will be a special Healing With Horses class at Medicine Horse for teens age 15 to 18 years old. On July 13, from 9 am to noon there will be a special Healing With Horses class for children age 6 to 9 years old. The cost of this class is \$30/person; however, a limited number of scholarships for low-income families are available. If you know of a child that may benefit from the *Healing With Horses* program, please call Calyn at Medicine Horse at 720-406-7630. You can also help sponsor a low-income child by making a donation to Medicine Horse.

For more information, visit www.medicinehorse.org.

Karolyn A. Gazella is the co-author of the *Definitive Guide to Cancer: An Integrative Approach to Prevention, Treatment, and Healing* (Celestial Arts 2007). Her book is available for \$38 (shipping not included) by calling Medicine Horse Program at 720-406-7630 with 50% of the proceeds of book sales helping at-risk youth in our area.