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Trish Lemke, of Joy Rides, tends to a horse at Riversong Ranch during a recent “Mindfulness at the Stable” session. The purpose of the outings is to empower and build confidence./Photo by Jennaye Derge

Unbridling passion Joy Rides offers self-discovery through horses by *Jen Reeder*

The sun is shining on a recent Sunday morning at Riversong Ranch, north of Durango, and a group of women approaches a corral where horses are nonchalantly eating.

“Get into your bodies,” the leader, Trish

Lemke, says. “Listen to your hearts.”

She opens the gate, and the women draw closer to the horses. A brown stallion abandons his chow, stepping toward the newcomers, interested.

“What are you feeling?” Lemke asks as one of the women starts stroking the horse’s nose.

“Love!”

“And how does that feel in your body?”

“Warm.”

“Remember that sensation. Take it into your daily life.”

It’s the start of “Mindfulness at the Stable,” a weekly program of Lemke’s new business, Joy Rides. Lemke spent the last decade working at a local equine-assisted therapy center, so she’s seen horses help heal people’s emotional and psychological issues. She launched Joy Rides last summer in order to offer “equine-guided coaching” to a broader population.

“Equine-guided coaching is more for everybody. Maybe ‘I feel a little stuck in my job,’ or ‘Something about my relationship isn’t right,’ or ‘I want to have more fun in my life,’” Lemke says. “It’s getting back to discovering who you are and what brings you joy.”

Lemke offers individual and group sessions, such as the Sunday women’s program, and tailors the experience to the participants. It might involve petting, brushing and leading a horse, but not necessarily riding one.

For instance, a couple having relationship issues booked a private session with Joy Rides. In working together to get Lemke’s mare, Daisy, to move around for an exercise, they were kind and considerate to one another and realized they’d lost that in their relationship.

“What they came away with was starting to remember why they loved each other in the first place,” Lemke says. “They were holding hands and walking the horse together.”

In a women's group, a schoolteacher was supposed to lead Daisy around a field, but the horse just wanted to eat grass and stay in control. Lemke and her team suggested, "Look up – raise your eyes and look where you want to go," and when the woman did so, Daisy began obediently following her lead. Later, the teacher mentioned she usually walked with her eyes downcast in the hallways at her school, and Lemke told her try looking up instead. The following Sunday, the teacher said her week was "like night and day" because people responded to her and were much more engaged.

"It's really simple things that we do, but it's really profound," Lemke says. "I love the work with the horses and the people – it's definitely my passion and my calling. It's what I'm supposed to do in this world."

Joy Rides also offers a middle school horse camp in spring and fall. Lemke says the basis of the camp is learning how to ride and care for horses, but that it also builds confidence and relieves stress.

"I tell these girls all the time, 'If you, weighing 60 or 70 pounds, can lead a 1,000-pound animal and have this animal respect you and do what you want, you can do anything,'" Lemke says. "And the horses are really amazing – they accept them for who they are. They don't care what they look like, what they're wearing, if they have the newest fashions."

Future Joy Rides offerings include corporate retreats that emphasize teambuilding, a May "Cowgirl Clinic," and guided horse trips in Italy, Costa Rica and, closer to home, Ute Mountain Tribal Park.

"I think people use travel as a distraction – 'I have this job that I hate and I want to get out of here and go on vacation and it's going to feel so good.' And it does feel good for that week," Lemke says. "But the purpose of my trips is to help people figure out why they want to go in the first place, and then support them in trying to make some changes in their lives that are going to make them happier every day in their day-to-day lives."

While some of the horse trips require an intermediate level of experience with horses, "99 percent" of Joy Rides programs are open to people of all experience levels, Lemke says.

Durango resident Shireen Symonds doesn't have any formal training with horses; she's gone horseback riding with friends and taken commercial "nose-to-tail" tours. Last weekend, she attended a "Mindfulness at the Stable" session thinking it would be fun.

"It was so much more than what I thought it would be," Symonds says. "It made me so happy in two hours."

She says she will definitely continue to attend Joy Rides events, and recommends others give it a try.

"Overall, I think animals are pretty darn special," she says. "There is so much benefit to a human/animal relationship."

For more information about Joy Rides, call 970-946-7835 or visit www.joyistheride.com.

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