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This story is a true account of a boy, Allan (not his real name for confidentiality purposes), who could not go to school because he had severe anxiety. He was being home schooled while his mother desperately sought help to get him back in to school. The school board was involved to ensure that he would be returning to the classroom. This boy and his family were in crisis when he attended Dreamcatcher Nature-Assisted Therapy Ltd. as a last attempt to get the help he needed. Dreamcatcher is a program where rescued, once homeless or abused animals in a natural setting are helping people in need. Allan attended this therapeutic/counselling program for 6 months. Below is an account of his story which was written several years ago, followed by an update and some information on animal and nature assisted therapy.

Panic Attacks

Tentatively and quietly he said “I can’t go to school.” The words came out as if they had been clawing in his throat all day and finally managed to narrowly escape. His penetrating stare was demanding an answer to an unasked question; silently screaming for help.

At 14, Allan was having panic attacks. In fact, this was his second year living with medication and one of the most frightening mental health disorders. Panic attacks strike without notice, unexpectedly stealing your breath and causing your heart to pound in your chest. There is only one word to describe them: Horrifying.

Allan had been to four therapists and two psychiatrists in the past year. He was desperately worried that there was no solution to his problem. He wanted to go back to school but he could not. He had been out for a month now and the fear of going back was holding him hostage. As I stared back into the depths of his fear-filled eyes, I prayed silently: “Please help me help him.”

Although I have been a therapist and behavior management specialist for fifteen years, I am nowhere near as good at helping people as my 23 fur-and-feathered helpers are. It was time for Allan to meet my co-counsellors. We left the house and were guided by moonlight through the wet snow to the old shed where the chickens were sleeping. They were perched up on the highest shelf and started protesting the minute we opened the door, squawking and clucking; reprimanding us for disturbing their sleep. We invited Allan to help us deliver them a peace offering and a plea for forgiveness; oats, their favorite treat. Allan stood in the center of the coop with chickens kamikazying all around him as they left their roost to accept his gifts. The baby rooster stepped off the shelf and went awkwardly careening right past his head. Allan never flinched. He stood riveted in place and appeared fascinated by the chaos we were causing. I picked up Molly, a huge laying hen who’s named after my Aunt and whom we’ve had since she was three days old, and held her out for him to pet. He gathered her to him, took off his

glove and gently stroked her dark brown head. Molly crooned. As Allan embraced her he heaved a sigh that had long since been held captive. I automatically heaved one too, releasing a breath I didn't know I had been holding since I met him.

Although Allan was visibly trembling from the cold night air, he wanted to meet the rest. Off to the three-way shelter. Loaded with alfalfa cubes, he stepped into the corral. Six heads reached out to greet him and the city boy stood tall amongst them. Three eager horses nudged their noses up against him and overtop of every horse was a curious llama, sniffing his hair and silently begging him to flip a cube his way. They teamed around him and for a split second he was gone, absorbed into the folds of manes, tails and foot-long ears. The boss mare, Buttons, forced a clearing with a flick of her tail and through the opening we saw the radiant face of a transformed child. He was laughing and held one hand against Buttons' cheek as she nuzzled his nose with her big fuzzy lips. If I didn't see him go in there, I would have sworn he was a different boy. In place of the fearful, mask-like expression he previously wore, was the face of a boy with not a care in the world. It was as if those few fleeting seconds rallied together to force the softening of his worried features. As he crooked his neck to look way up into the face of his new hairy friend, my pulse beat faster as I thought: "This is going to work."

The bond was instant, Allan chose Buttons to work with. I was dumbfounded. Children don't usually choose Buttons because when they greet her she tosses her head, flattens her ears and bares her teeth at them. Something was different about Allan. She wanted to be with him and followed him around, she was nice to him and kept kissing his face, giving me a heart attack each time her muzzle came into contact with his vulnerable skin. When I asked Allan why he picked Buttons he said: "Because she's like me." I looked at my assistant, who is a horse professional, and she just smiled and nodded her head. She had been trying to get me to see this side of Buttons for a year and I just didn't get it. I went with the flow and confirmed Allan's statement: "You're right, she's like you" even though I had no idea what they were talking about.

Allan led Buttons away from her herd and we tied her just on the other side of the fence, away from them. She began to pace. When we held her still, she put her head way up and looked wildly down at us. She pawed the ground with her perfectly manicured hoof and tossed her head violently up and down. She was panicking. Allan said: "She's afraid, like me" and he was right. We worked together to calm her down, teaching Allan how to help her through her fear, how to help her feel safe. He had no horse experience but within two hours, she followed him around the shelter and out of herd sight with no coercion, no lead rope. There was a magnetic force between them that was so strong it was almost visible. I truly had never seen this side of Buttons.

After working with her for just three short weeks, Allan has helped Buttons learn to remain calm whenever she is away from her herd. At the same time, he has been able to go to school for up to half an hour on five different days and though he has a ways to go, he is determined to get there. Allan says if Buttons can do it, so can he. Although they are different species, they share the same torment and are teaching each other how to feel safe in the world. Allan hasn't had a panic attack since he started and Buttons is calm and quiet in pasture, a thing we have never seen. These two souls are connecting on a level that defies my eight agonizing years of university and fifteen years of therapeutic experience. I could never have done for Allan or Buttons what they have done for each other. They are healing and my prayers have been answered.

Update: Allan continued to attend the Dreamcatcher program for 6 months. Every week, he spent an hour working with Buttons. With professional assistance, he took her farther and farther away from her herd, observed her natural coping skills and taught her new ones while he practiced his own. He rode her while role playing his own anxiety-provoking situations which he had to do in a calm state because Buttons suffered from anxiety too and while on top of her, she was extremely sensitive to him. Allan learned to discuss his feelings and communicate them in a healthy way rather than bottle them up and become anxious in a way that was beyond his control. Allan last attended the program in 2004.

In the Summer of 2009, Allan's mother sent a heartfelt letter to Dreamcatcher. It contained Allan's high school graduation picture. He had graduated with honors. Allan thanked Buttons and her human helpers for helping him get back to school and stay there but it was Allan who did all the work.

About Animal and Nature-Assisted Therapies

Animal and nature-assisted therapies are new to our Canadian concept of counseling. Unfortunately, they have not yet been fully accepted by the medical professions but the research is becoming more and more scientific and ground breaking which is propelling these alternate forms of helping people forward.

Sometimes children and youth need help because they are too afraid or too angry or too shy to get along with others or succeed in the school setting. Some children and youth do well with the school counselor or with a play or talk therapist in an office setting and are able to get the help they need in these settings which are plentiful. There is a percentage of children and youth however, who do not fair well in these traditional therapeutic settings. These children may have diagnosed disabilities or mental health disorders, brain abnormalities, behavioral symptoms or many other things affecting their ability to do well in traditional counseling or in school. Animal and nature assisted therapies provide a natural motivation for this population to get the help they need. In a relaxed and natural setting, young people are partnered with a non-threatening, loving animal and a highly skilled human professional.

According to anthropologist Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence and entomologist E.O. Wilson (1984), winner of two Pulitzer prizes, humans are genetically attuned to pay attention to animals and nature due to the fact that we, as a species, evolved with animals in a natural setting. They claim that we have a need to affiliate with other living organisms, that animals and nature optimize our health and bring about positive changes in our behavior and that contact with animals and nature influences our cognition, health and well being. This is the foundational belief behind working with animals in a natural setting to help people in need.

Animal and nature assisted therapies are becoming more popular and being accepted in a wider variety of therapeutic settings. More research must be conducted before it is fully funded in our country but it is well on its way. Animals provide unconditional love and acceptance, honesty, immediate responses to our feelings and actions and have a way of putting people at ease in social situations. The research that has been done states that animal interactions can facilitate language, enhance verbal

skills, increase attention span and stimulate and improve cognitive abilities in children and adolescents (Nathanson & de Faria, 1994); pet owners have higher self esteem and confidence (Terpin, 2004); interacting with a dog can lower anxiety (Barker & Dawson, 1998); interacting with an animal can reduce anxiety during therapy (Allen, Blascovic & Mendes, 2002); children with behavioral and mental health issues showed an increase in General Functioning scores when an animal was included in their therapy sessions (Schultz, Remick-Barlow & Robbins, 2007); and interacting with animals can improve empathic ability (Ascione, 1992).

Research and anecdotal evidence also clearly identifies that animals can act as a buffer in traumatic experiences, can help people adjusting to serious illness or death of a loved one, can support sexual and physical abuse victims, can reduce Post Traumatic Stress symptoms and can decrease loneliness and depression. Research in this field is ongoing and is becoming and more scientifically based. Animal and nature assisted therapies have been in existence for hundreds of years but are only recently being recognized as effective alternate therapies in Canada.

Dreamcatcher has been in operation since 2003. It is run by a Registered Psychologist and currently has 20 fur or feathered rescued or adopted animals all of whom come with their own life story, personal issues and life obstacles. At Dreamcatcher, rescued and once homeless animals who have been specially screened and chosen as co-counsellors are partnering with children and youth to help them overcome their life issues, whatever they might be. Together, young people are healing animals and animals are healing young people.

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