



SonFlower Stables provides an equine connection for those seeking personal understanding

By [Jennifer Vandermeer](#), [Norwich Gazette/Ingersoll Times](#)



Years of equine-assisted learning facilitation has taught Mary Howe how to interpret the actions of her team of 12 horses at SonFlower Stables in Otterville. While Marnie seems to be nibbling at Michaela's coat, Howe said there is a distinct meaning behind the action. JENNIFER VANDERMEER/Norwich Gazette

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OTTERVILLE - “Magical” is a word that comes up several times when trying to describe how it feels to participate in equine-assisted learning.

It was used often during a recent meeting of four women from around the region who have each been gaining positive personal experience from the services of Mary Howe and her team of 12 horses at SonFlower Stables in Otterville.

Howe is a grief resolutions edu-therapy specialist who facilitates equine-assisted learning to help people address the root of what's troubling them. For instance, Kim Dobias of Delhi was experiencing anxiety and sadness about matters in her personal life; Janet Roelens of Norwich had her own anxieties about career and her roles in life; Michaela, a Port Dover teen, had experienced trauma; and Megan Dobias of Tillsonburg wanted to overcome her fear and gain trust.

In their individual sessions with the horses at SonFlower, each has gained some resolution and is learning more about herself and the therapeutic impact horses can have.

“It was magical,” said Michaela, who preferred not to use her last name.

Michaela has been attending the stables about three times per week since Christmas, when she saw an article about SonFlower Stables, Howe and the potential healing power she could access with the horses.

“When a horse meets a human, magic happens,” said Howe, who has been working with horses since she was five years old, and is certified as a grief resolutions professional.

On the SonFlower Stables Facebook page, Howe explains “we have a devoted team of horses who are uniquely sensitive to the emotional, psychological, personal development within each human need. Equine Assisted Learning sessions help us observe the participant's requirements of growth. We offer coping skills that will empower their day to day lives within their work place, home, school, families and friends.”

“It was a godsend for me,” said Roelens, who discovered the stables on social media. “It came to me at a pivotal time in my life and it's helping me tremendously.”

Roelens tries to get to the stables about three times a week and said each time she's been there over a period of about three months, she leaves with a sense that the time spent with the horses is helping her resolve her anxieties.

Kim Dobias has known Howe for decades, but wasn't really clear about what she was doing with the horses at the stables. Kim visited one evening and found herself stopping to visit several horses in their paddocks. The horses greeted Kim, who grew up around horses, with a sense of curiosity.

“A feeling of excitement quickly overcame me and something came back to me,” Kim wrote in a testimonial. “What came back to me was the feelings that horses evoke. They have a way of connecting with you, of sensing your state of mind and giving you feedback with their actions.”

Over the next few months, Kim started to help out at the stables. That exposed her to more time with Howe, who sensed an uneasiness inside Kim.

“Here I was in the middle of equine therapy, with the horses at my disposal. It was time to do some work... Mary quickly diagnosed my sense of loss and urged me to spend some time with one of her special horses - a grey female named Maggie.”

The two quickly developed a bond and several sessions later, Howe explained what she had observed between Kim and Maggie, and the meaning of their interactions.

The two continue to work together, and Kim has even joined Howe as a member of the board of directors of the not-for-profit organization.

Howe explained horses are the only animal that mirrors human behaviour. Both have similar limbic systems and exhibit similar emotions, from peace and contentment to animosity and jealousy.

“The thing here is there's no judgment,” said Howe. “Anyone who walks in here knows it's between them and the horses.”

For Megan Dobias, each time she is at the stables, she feels a peaceful energy and calmness.

“It's a place for me to come meditate and quiet my mind,” Megan noted. “The horses have an incredible way of helping us to let go of the past and teach us how to be present in each moment.”

Roelens explained when she leaves after being at the stables, she feels relaxed.

“I feel a sense of purpose,” she said. “Of all the things that I've done, I feel this is the greatest.”

Howe's edu-therapy sessions are also designed to address many other behaviours and conditions, from depression to PTSD and suicidal ideation/prevention. As a suicide survivor herself, Howe said the horses were a saviour for her and have been able to help many other participants. She also works with foster children and handicapped adults.

Each of the participants at the stables is a volunteer who helps with the upkeep of the horses. As a non-profit organization, Howe relies on the generosity of the community to help with donations of quality hay, shavings, farrier and/or veterinary services.

Volunteers are welcome at SonFlower. The work involves being around the horses and sharing in the barn-related chores.

To contact Howe, call 519-718-1432.