

# Horse behavior in the field

December 10 2013, by Susan Griffith

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A nudge from the nose of a free-roaming zebra, or towering, 2,500-pound Clydesdale draft horse, might send others running.

But Lauren Burke, a graduate student at Case Western Reserve University's [social work](#) school, instead extends a curved hand to return the equine "hello."

In her required social work field placement, Burke spent the last 18 months at Spirit of Leadership at the Pebble Ledge Ranch in Novelty, Ohio, learning to communicate with horses (and a zebra), becoming "one with the herd" and teaching others how to do the same in an [experiential learning](#) with horses program that inspires self-discovery.

By developing a sensitivity to the body language of horses, explained Jacalyn Lowe Stevenson, Spirit of Leadership founder and president and Burke's supervisor, humans may better understand nonverbal communication in each other—the goal of which is to enhance the group dynamic, from the corporate boardroom to the family dining room table.

Among corporate and nonprofit clients are ArcelorMittal, Lubrizol, Humana, University Hospitals of Cleveland, Cleveland Metroparks Zoo, Ohio Mutual Insurance, the Cleveland Rape Crisis Center, the American Heart Association, Bratenahl Police, Israeli Defense Force, and U.S. military veterans.

Understanding a horse's non-verbal body language and, in turn, being accepted as a member of the herd is part of a new approach Stevenson

pioneered and developed, called Equine Guided Coaching and Experiential Learning with Horses.

Stevenson's work and organization has inspired Burke, who wants to use animal therapy and personal discovery (particularly horses) in her social work profession.

Stevenson, MSSA, an adjunct instructor at the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences and the Weatherhead School of Management, uses horses as the center of therapy that promotes self-discovery, innovation and positive relationships.

At Spirit of Leadership, Burke learned how to advance the program's vision as a catalyst for leadership excellence, team performance and organizational spirit—all inspired by horses.

Burke has worked directly with clients, has helped plan an international conference on equine-guided coaching, traveled to Atlanta, Baltimore and Lexington, Ky., to establish herd relationships and work with corporate clients in each city. Of course, she's also had to experience the more mundane, cleaning barns and feeding horses.

Before clients are introduced to the horses, Burke begins with a 15-minute lesson in nonverbal horse communications—the meaning of ear positioning, swishing tails, and handling a nose-to-nose welcome.

No one rides the horses; it is about engaging in a relationship with the horses and team members. Burke teaches clients how to go from greeting the horses, to creating respect and trust to leading a horse through an obstacle course, called the "Field of Possibilities." By doing so, clients achieve skills in working as a team.

This unique experiential learning evolved from Stevenson's counseling

sessions on her 80-acre ranch. She noticed clients always stopped to talk to horses freely roaming the pastures and woods on her Western Reserve Land Conservancy Trust property along the Chagrin River.

The attraction to the horses inspired Stevenson to put chairs in the field and conduct client sessions among the grazing horses.

Clients began to notice how the horses responded to their attitudes. The horses would approach if they sensed people were excited to see them and passionate about what they were discussing or retreated if they sensed disinterest.

That sent a powerful message to clients, Stevenson said. The excitement demonstrated to clients what they were passionate about, and goals they wanted to accomplish. They also become aware of their inner strengths.

Stevenson has incorporated a number of Case Western Reserve researched and developed theories by faculty at the management school: David Cooperrider's appreciative inquiry (building from individual or organizational strengths), Richard Boyatzis' emotional intelligence (how skillful people are with interacting with each other) and David Kolb's style of learning (learning by experiencing).

The approach is based on the belief that humans and horses share a natural connection. In fact, Burke said, horses are a metaphor for humans who, like a herd, once lived and worked together, with each member contributing to maintaining the tribe. And, like an isolated and lonely human, horses also suffer emotional and physical problems when separated from their herds, she said.

According to Stevenson, horses developed a herd life over the last 60 million years for survival by drawing on each other's strength, moving toward that which is positive and adapting to environmental changes.

"Horses have set such good examples for how to live my life as a leader, family member, friend, potentially a wife and mother, and how to be a good social worker who embodies the profession," Burke said.

Burke and social work grad student Casey Dawson were the first to have a field placement at Spirit of Leadership. Each had to pass several requirements Stevenson set, including a love of—and experience working with—horses in their natural setting and a strong desire to help people.

Burke has been riding since age 4 on her family's rural Pennsylvanian farm, a home to six horses.

After graduating from the University of Findlay as a double major in social work and a western equestrian program, Burke enrolled at the Mandel School to pursue a master's of science in social administration degree. The opportunity for field placement at Stevenson's farm was a major attraction.

"My career goal," said Burke, who graduates this semester, "is to take everything that I've learned from Jackie and the [horses](#), and my educational experiences to set up an equine-based facility that focuses on animal-assisted therapy to promote personal discovery, growth and learning."

Provided by Case Western Reserve University

Citation: Horse behavior in the field (2013, December 10) retrieved 17 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-12-horse-behavior-field.html>

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