

WITH HELP FROM THE IRELAND FUNDS,
EQUINE ENRICHMENT IS PROVIDING
AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO
MENTAL HEALTH IN NORTHERN IRELAND

EQUINE ENRICHMENT





Who would think that an animal weighing over 1,000 pounds, at times both elegant and intimidating, could help people move beyond trauma, find safe space and foster healthy relationships? This is exactly what is happening at Equine Enrichment in the rural countryside just outside Derry/Londonderry in Northern Ireland.

THE WORK OF EQUINE ENRICHMENT IS UNIQUE. It is the only organization in Northern Ireland offering EAGALA (Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association). Studies have shown that equine-assisted therapy lowers blood pressure, alleviates stress, and reduces symptoms of anxiety and depression. It has also been shown to help people struggling with addiction and mental health issues.

With support from The Ireland Funds, Equine Enrichment has assisted groups of young people between ages 11-18. Over the course of 10 weeks, two groups of young people experiencing behavioral and/or emotional issues came to the stables to work on a range of topics from relationships to communication to leadership and resiliency. Working with a mental health specialist and an equine specialist, many of these children have experienced significant improvement in their behaviors and outlooks.

"We're working with children with very high levels of deprivation," explains Louise Moorhead, a trainer and administrator with Equine Enrichment. "These are children who have come from intergenerational trauma. For many, the trauma of the Troubles has been transferred on to them. This program is also about providing them with an alternative to hanging about the streets and being exposed to drugs and alcohol. We find 11 year olds who can chat to you quite openly about heroin and name every drug on the street. We are passionate that our generation has been affected but not defined by the Troubles. Our generation has been given a fresh start and Equine Enrichment is a fresh approach to creating change and moving forward."

The program is surprising to some people as it does not involve horseback riding. Participants interact with the horses on the ground. Caring for them, feeding them, grooming and leading them, even doing breathing exercises with them. "A lot of people say, 'why don't you go horseback riding?'" says Louise. "Horses pick up our facial communication, our body language and energy, even our heartbeat."



life is beautiful

Photos: Aengus McMahon



We find that fostering a positive relationship on the ground first is what best works through some emotional roadblocks.”

Many of the children who have gone through the program are veterans of other social services. The unique nature of Equine Enrichment has been a breakthrough for some. “When these young people come out here they are finally connecting with their body, mind, and soul,” says Carla Devine, a Director with Equine Enrichment. “There is something about being present in what is going on because they have to be positive for the horse to respond to them in a positive way. Sometimes a young person will grab the reins and wait. We say to them ‘You need to be the leader. How can you be effective? If you stand up straight and give off vibes of confidence, that horse will follow you.’ It is instant bio-feedback. To see the difference that simple change makes, is profound.”

“It took me about three sessions to feel comfortable,” says Roisin, a participant in the EAGALA program. “The first time I came I could feel my heart beating when Buddy (the horse) came over. I was shaking like a leaf....”

But Roisin and her friend Caitlin not only came through The Ireland Funds-sponsored program, but came to love the horses and the outcomes so much they have stayed on to serve as mentors to future groups of young people.

“I brushed Buddy’s tail, strand by strand,” explains Roisin. “I learned that we can pace our breath to the same breath as the horse. They breathe longer and slower.” Roisin smiles as she says proudly, “I have no fear of horses anymore.”

Roisin and Caitlin shared that they see many of their peers struggling with mental health issues and trauma. “There’s just not enough support out there, and there’s trust issues too. You’re constantly wondering ‘are they judging me? Are they talking about me?’” says Roisin. “And in some families you can still feel isolated. No one knows what happens behind closed doors. But here, you feel like someone understands your world.”



LEFT: ROISIN AND CAITLIN,
TWO YOUNG WOMEN WHO
CAME THROUGH THE IRELAND
FUNDS-SPONSORED PROGRAM.
THEY ARE NOW STUDYING
CHILD CARE AT NORTHWEST
REGIONAL COLLEGE AND HAVE
STAYED ON TO SERVE AS PEER
MENTORS FOR FUTURE GROUPS
AT EQUINE ENRICHMENT.

85%

OF YOUTH PARTICIPANTS
SHOWED SIGNIFICANT
IMPROVEMENT IN
MENTAL WELL-BEING
AND SELF-ESTEEM AFTER
COMING THROUGH
THE EAGALA PROGRAM.

IT MAKES ME
FEEL HAPPY.

WHEN I COME OUT HERE
I CAN LEAVE ALL MY
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THINGS JUST DON'T
SEEM AS BAD."

— BOY, AGED 12