

Healing Horses

On a 9-acre ranch in Meiners Oaks, people and horses are healing each other.



Adri Howe, executive director at California Coastal Horse Rescue, with Cheyenne.

Take Cheyenne, an abused 20-year-old male saddlebred and draft horse cross, and Shaun, a 7-year-old boy with cerebral palsy. The two met on March 31, when California Coastal Horse Rescue, at 600 W. Lomita Ave., hosted a group of 10 special-needs children and their families, for a day of fun with the horses.

Founded with the goal of rescuing and offering rehabilitation, refuge and adoption services to horses in need, CCHR also wanted to share the horses and the ranch with the community. So the rescue started reading and educational programs for kids, programs for special needs children and programs for adults with dementia and substance abuse issues.

Adri Howe, executive director at CCHR, began working with Cheyenne when she first joined the rescue.

"Cheyenne is probably one of the most abused horses we've ever taken in," Howe said. Animal officials had taken Cheyenne from where he'd been abandoned and said if CCHR couldn't take him, they would euthanize him because of the danger he posed to people. "So we brought him to the rescue and we just let him be a horse for a while. He got to see the other horses and their responses to people."

Despite Cheyenne's trust issues and mental health after he was so badly abused, Howe said, he's probably one of the most communicative horses in the CCHR stable. "It's almost like Cheyenne, having struggled and gone through such hardship, is particularly sensitive to people." The bad times he endured seem to have given him something special. "He can relate to emotions. He can relate to a variety of people. He happens to relate very well to children, because they're not threatening to him."

As part of CCHR's Learn, Care & Share program, kids get to meet the horses and hear their stories. They can pet and brush the horses and make horse-

by Perry Van Houton

related crafts to take home. The ranch has hosted foster children and home-school groups. The outing in March included families from the Autism Society of Ventura County.

Many of the children — like the rescue horses — have not had easy lives, said Howe. “The horses can help kids sometimes, by kids just learning their stories. The horses are just these amazing ambassadors.”

Enter Shaun. At first, through tears, he pleaded with his mother to take him home. Then he met Cheyenne. “Watching Cheyenne, he got Shaun right away,” said Howe. “He knew what to do, how to approach him and how to say ‘I’m here,’ but in a non-invasive way. These horses are masters at reading us.”

The horse came up to the boy, facing him at first. “I saw that he would lean down and touch Shaun’s shoes with his nose.” Then Cheyenne yawned a big yawn. Horses, like people, will do that when they’re tired, but the type of repetitive yawning Cheyenne was doing is more of an energy release. “He feels good enough to let it go,” said Howe. “It was almost like he was taking Shaun in and taking in his energy, and giving it back, in a way.”

Cheyenne appeared incredibly relaxed — in his zone, Howe said. “He doesn’t do that with just anyone. When Shaun didn’t really react to his face or his head, Cheyenne turned his body and put it very close to the fence, so Shaun could touch him.”

Howe said Cheyenne is very frightened of objects, because of his prior abuse. So seeing him so relaxed and so interested in a boy in a wheelchair was remarkable. “It’s like the chair didn’t even exist,” she said.

Cheyenne was really just trying to find

the best way to further communicate with Shaun. “There was just this very deep, instant communication between the two of them,” recalled Howe, who said she would have liked to have heard the “conversation” in words.

It’s what Howe calls therapy without the therapy. “It is unbelievable, the healing that these animals bring to us.

Sometimes it takes a creature completely outside of the child’s life to really just feel that child, and understand that child, and then reach

have value anymore,” Howe explained.

CCHR, founded as a nonprofit in 2000, provides the horses with holistic rehabilitation that brings them back to the highest level of well-being. Each horse gets a full physical examination by a veterinarian. Then the rehab begins, starting with the horse’s diet.

On June 1, the ranch hosted “Help A Horse Day,” a national effort by the ASPCA to find homes for horses in need. While Howe loves to see horses and people helping each other, finding



Chelsea, 5, meets one of the rescue horses at California Coastal Horse Rescue.

out to that child in the best way. We saw an incredible bridge being built between the two of them,” Howe said.

Since its inception, CCHR has provided sanctuary to more than 150 horses and ponies and has also helped place more than 600 horses in new homes through its adoption services and collaborative efforts with other rescues.

The all-volunteer organization rescues horses of all breeds, ages, histories and temperaments. “We’ve rescued horses that were about to be sent to slaughter or about to be euthanized, because someone felt they were old and didn’t

good, permanent matches for the horses remains CCHR’s ultimate goal.

Some of the horses may remain at the ranch the rest of their lives, since they’re not adoptable because of either age or infirmity. Like Cheyenne, some of them have endured horrific abuse. Part of the healing process, said Howe, “is showing them that even though humans have let them down, this is a different kind of human.” ■

For more information on California Coastal Horse Rescue, visit www.calcoastalhorserescue.com