

THE HORSE CURE

TRUE STORIES

Remarkable Horses Bringing
Miraculous Change to Humankind

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Lessons in
EQUINE-PARTNERED
COUNSELING
from
Unbridled Change

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Bear: I Will Not Leave You

Gwen

When I was working as the equine specialist for a residential treatment center that specialized in attachment therapy, I worked with one of the girls, “Gwen,” for about a year. One session in particular was a turning point for her.

It was a spring day and Gwen made her way down the hillside toward the barn with her therapist. The girl had been having a rough couple of weeks. One would have thought she should have been happy: She was doing well at both the treatment center and at school. She was up for adoption and had met her “new family” numerous times. In fact, she had just come back for a long weekend stay with them, and they only had a few more home visits before she would be released from the residential facility for a trial placement as the adoption process finished out.

Exciting, Right?

Wrong! Gwen had been this far in the process a couple of times. Every time she would sabotage the placement, endangering herself or others. Basically, Gwen would come “off the rails” right before the adoption process was to be finalized and end up extending her stay with us or going back to detention.

Prior to that day's session, she had just come back from the home visit and immediately picked a physical fight with another resident, cussed out staff, and threatened to run away if they sent her back. Staff and her therapist tried to talk with her about what was happening and help her see the pattern of her behavior. But she was so volatile that day, no one felt safe approaching her.

Gwen was over 6 feet tall and built like a linebacker. When she became explosive, it was not uncommon for it to take three to four staff members to restrain her. She had once broken a hole through the sheetrock wall in an attempt to get to another resident in the safe room. It also wasn't uncommon for her to throw things and threaten staff and residents with her sheer size. Those at the residential facility learned to help reduce Gwen's stress levels by not pushing when she showed signs of accelerating. They found that the best place to process with her and hold her accountable was at the barn. With the horses, Gwen presented an entirely different persona. She was soft and almost small in her movements. She spent extra time helping with chores, and we could move her through her various triggers because she didn't want to hurt or scare the horses with her "normal" physical outbursts.

Learning to Trust Enough

Gwen's therapist had given me a heads-up about where Gwen was emotionally when they arrived that spring day. She wanted to try and plant the seed for Gwen to see the pattern of her behavior so that she could start to be aware of where it was coming from, because the feeling was that Gwen and the new adoptive family really were great for each other. The family was willing to work through Gwen's outbursts and wanted her to join their household.

During her sessions with me, Gwen had been working with Bear, an off-the-track Thoroughbred adopted from the Thoroughbred

Retirement Foundation. Bear was a large bay gelding, about 16.3 hands, and loved to run. Like many ex-racehorses, he was also a bit skittish, and clients had to learn to move more slowly around him than some of our other horses (photo 23).

The breeze was blowing, and I watched the clouds move slowly through the blue sky as Bear grazed beside me. We waited for Gwen and her therapist to cross the field into the grass arena where I stood with the Thoroughbred. As they approached, I smiled and asked my normal opening question, “How are we doing today?”

Gwen glared at me. “Fine.”

Still smiling, I replied, “Well your body is telling me a different story, but for now we can stay with ‘fine.’”

Gwen looked over at me with the corner of her eye and cracked a smile. “What are we going to do today?” she asked as she moved over to Bear and stroked him as he grazed.

“Well, I thought, given where you are at in working with the new family, it might be a good idea to explore how to show trust and respect again,” I suggested. “A little bird told me that you do not want to go back to them.” Gwen gave me a hard look. Holding my hands up in front of me, I added, “That’s fine...I’m not here to talk you out of that choice. We are not going to worry about them right now but instead how *you* can show trust and respect.”

“Okay, whatever...” Gwen grumbled. She dropped her hand from Bear’s side and looked at her therapist and then at me.

I didn’t want to give her too much time to build up resistance, so I said, “Great! You know how you and Bear have been working on him being willing to walk next to you?”

“Yes, he goes wherever I go. So what is new about that? He trusts me and will follow.”

“You’re right,” I agreed. “He does trust you and follow you. He is showing you respect, too. But that is kind of easy for you guys now. I

would like to see what happens when he is given the choice to listen and respect your requests, even if you are not right there next to him. This would show us how it might work when you actually do join your adoptive family for good. Will you keep making the right choices without all of us right there with you?” I paused. “So the activity today is to ask Bear to stay in one place that you choose and then see if you can walk away, do something else, and come back to him—with him still standing in the same place, hanging out, waiting for you. It’s kind of like asking a dog to sit and stay. The horse shows he respects you enough to listen and trusts you enough to know that you are going to come back to him and not leave him forever. At the same time, you show him you can trust him enough to leave him, knowing he will still be there when you come back.”

I looked at the therapist to see if she had anything to add, but she indicated we should go ahead. Gwen had been in enough EPPC sessions to know that my activity “directions” were typically vague and open-ended, leaving it up to her to figure out how to actually complete the task based on her own style and not mine. She also knew that we were willing to help her, but first she had to try herself and show she was making an effort to find a path or a solution. If she came to a place where she needed help, she could ask—but we would not do it for her. Instead, her therapist and I would help her break down the problem until she came up with a new idea to try.

Gwen approached Bear and asked him to pick up his head. He did. She then asked him to walk over to the middle of the ring. He did. She told him to stay, then turned instantly around and started to walk away. Bear stood for a second then walked off as well, put his head down, and started grazing again. Gwen didn’t notice he had moved from his spot until she turned to check after walking about 20 feet away from the horse. Gwen huffed with frustration, marched over to Bear, reached down, placed her hand under his jaw bone, and picked his head up. She

looked at him intently as she told him to stay again. This time Gwen didn't even get to turn and walk away before Bear took a few steps off the spot and returned to grazing.

Gwen turned to us, put her hands on her hips, and stated, "This is stupid. Bear doesn't care about me today. All he cares about is eating." Right after making the statement she turned back to Bear and yelled at him: "You stupid! Why are you ignoring me?"

The therapist reached out and touched my arm. She whispered that she wasn't sure if we should stop the activity and process what was happening, or maybe go to an easier activity. She feared that because Gwen had already had one altercation that morning the girl's fuse was fairly short. I looked at my horse. Bear was calmly grazing. He had an ear on Gwen but that was it. He wasn't showing any signs of distress, and he was choosing to graze close to her. I told the therapist what I was seeing and we agreed to let it play out.

Gwen stormed off and sat down on the mounting block in the middle of the grass ring, about 40 feet from where Bear was grazing. I'm not sure how many minutes she sat there—long enough for me to wonder if we should intervene after all. All of a sudden, Gwen exploded, yelling and screaming at the big bay horse. "You're so stupid! I hate you! I can't believe you are ignoring me, you motherfucker!" She picked up a small soccer cone and threw it at him.

My protector bristles went up—a rule of our sessions was you could not hurt yourself or the horses. I was about to call her over for a "time out" when I realized that Bear had not stopped grazing. Now Bear would typically startle and run away from anything sudden that moved around him, but here he was, head down, calmly grazing as a cone hurtled past his head (photo 24). Gwen's therapist was ready to pounce on her, as well, and I reached out and grabbed her arm, pulling her back to me.

"Look at Bear," I said quietly. "He doesn't care. He isn't running

away. Let's see what happens. If he senses danger or a threat from her, he will let us know." Reluctantly, she agreed.

The cussing and screaming continued. "I hate you, you piece of shit! Why did I ever like you? Why aren't you paying attention to me! If you don't look at me I'm going to hurt you!"

Gwen got up and stomped around the ring. She came to a larger traffic cone and picked it up. Bear saw her movements, and his head came up, but he didn't move his feet. Gwen hurled the larger cone toward the horse. Bear moved two steps forward out of the way of the cone, and it whizzed past his rear end. He went back to grazing. This made Gwen furious. She screamed at him again to stop ignoring her. She picked up another cone and threw it. Again Bear moved out of its way and went back to grazing.

Something then shifted in Gwen: She went from yelling at the gelding to pay attention to her to yelling at him to keep away from her. "You better stay away from me! If you don't run away I'm going to hurt you! Did you hear me?" She looked for larger objects in the ring, next heaving a large plastic barrel toward Bear. The Thoroughbred's pattern shifted, as well. He stopped grazing and locked in on Gwen. His eyes, ears, and head remained totally focused on her. His body moved out of the way of the incoming barrel. When she went for another barrel, he moved out of its way, as well. But Bear wasn't moving away from Gwen. He was slowly closing the gap between them.

It was like watching a game of dodge ball. The enraged girl would find a random object and chuck it at him, yelling. Bear avoided the object and continued to approach her. By that point the things Gwen was screaming weren't even making sense. Mostly she was swearing at the top of her lungs. Bear made his move. He had managed to get within a few feet of her, and she had run out of things to throw. She was looking at him, still yelling, when the horse moved quickly to her, coming to a stop with his head over her shoulder and his chest against hers. I had

a moment's concern he was going to knock her down and keep going, but he didn't. Gwen took her arms and shoved at Bear's chest, but the horse moved back into her. She shoved again with what looked like all her body weight. Bear simply moved back into her space.

What happened next I will never forget: Gwen started to cry. The tears were through the cussing at first, then they turned into overwhelming sobs. Her arms and hands locked around Bear's large neck, and she buried her face in his long mane. Gwen's whole body shuddered as she wept. Her knees must have given out because Bear slowly lowered his head toward the ground, guiding Gwen into a sitting position. Gwen kept her arms locked around the horse's neck, her face hidden under his mane (photo 25).

"He Didn't Leave Me"

Gwen's therapist went to move toward them, but I again held her back and whispered, "Bear has this. Let him finish what he started." She stepped back to my side. Bear had brought his head into Gwen's back and was, in essence, drawing her closer to him as she continued to sob with her whole body. Eventually, you could barely hear her crying and her body softened.

Bear lifted his head and neck and began to slowly back up, now lifting Gwen off the ground as her arms remained locked around his neck. We could now hear her talking to him, although we couldn't discern what she was saying. Girl and horse remained in the standing and hugging position for a few more minutes. Then, gently, Bear shook his neck and head. When he shook, Gwen dropped her arms and pulled away from him. She stroked his neck, talking to him.

Gwen stepped back from Bear, who remained locked on Gwen with his eyes and ears, facing her. The girl then held her hands out in front of her and motioned for him to stay as she stepped back a few feet farther. The Thoroughbred watched and didn't move a muscle. Gwen

walked around him in a large circle. Bear didn't move his feet but followed her with his eyes and ears, and turning his head and neck to keep her in view.

After Gwen finished the circle, she walked back to Bear. She moved into him, again burying her head in his mane and hugging him with her arms. After a few moments she straightened her body, gave him a pat, and said, "Thank you."

Gwen turned and walked over to us with a smile. Her face was marked with tears and dirt. Wiping her face, she shared instantly, "He didn't leave me—no matter what I did, he didn't leave me."

I looked at Gwen's therapist and smiled.

What Came Next?

That spring day Bear showed us that trust comes in all forms. Afterward, Gwen was able to process with her therapist, discussing the trauma cycle she had acted out with Bear. Gwen then shared her story from the session with her adoptive family, and they assured her that they thought they could do the same thing Bear had done—they wouldn't leave her, no matter what.

Gwen was successfully placed in her new home, the adoption was finalized, and the last I knew, she was attending college.

Bear gave her what no human could. We all knew that Gwen needed to be held, to be felt, and to be seen by others, but she wouldn't let any of us do it. I believe Bear knew she needed him to not let go of her. Only Bear, a 1,200-pound horse, could give her what she needed.