

Chuck Mattke – Hooves of Heaven - 2

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

Hooves and heaven. How would those go together? Today, in the conclusion of this two-part series, we'll learn more about an enterprise in rural Kansas named Hooves of Heaven which is using horses to help troubled young people. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Last week we learned that Hooves of Heaven was founded by Chuck Mattke in northwest Kansas. Hooves of Heaven is an equine assisted learning organization for troubled youth.

"I've always loved horses," Chuck said. Through the years, Chuck saw how interaction with a horse could help a young person work out his or her troubles. He wanted a way to help even more children.

Chuck's farm has been in his family for more than 100 years. "My wife calls this place her little piece of heaven," Chuck said. So using the word heaven and the hooves of his horses, he called the organization Hooves of Heaven. In 2005, Hooves of Heaven was organized as a foundation with the vision of bringing people and horses together.

"We have never charged for riding lessons," Chuck said. "We take only donations." Kids come to Hooves of Heaven as foster children, juvenile justice clients, or from local families for riding and other human-horse interaction. "We had one kid who would not quit riding," Chuck said. "He just kept wanting to ride, and afterwards he helped us clean up. That young man became our first foster child."

One year Chuck got a call from Youthville, the Wichita facility operated by the Methodist church for youth who suffer from abuse, neglect, or abandonment. "They said they had 25 kids with no place to go for Christmas," Chuck said. Chuck organized an effort to serve those kids. Chuck and members of his board hauled their horses and wagons to Wichita, got food donated and prepared the kids a meal, and gave each child a fifty dollar gift certificate as a present.

Hooves of Heaven organizes large trail rides in scenic areas of western Kansas as fundraisers to support the work of the organization. Chuck especially appreciates how these horses can make a difference in a child's life.

"Miraculous things can happen when we get kids and horses together," Chuck said. One girl who was on suicide watch in a juvenile facility came to Hooves of Heaven. She was put in a pen with a group of horses. She observed their behavior and gave names to each horse in a way which ultimately helped a therapist to understand what was happening with her family relationships. Six weeks later, that girl was able to go home.

"It's equine assisted learning," Chuck said. "You can't tell these kids what to do, you have them tell you what's going on in their lives. Then you use what they're telling you to help them. You become a tool of God's grace."

The horses are remarkable tools of grace in this process as well. "Our horses can read the mood of these kids," Chuck said. "It's something I'll never be able to explain."

For example, a troubled young man came to Hooves of Heaven and was placed in a pen of horses as Chuck and the therapist watched. The horses surrounded the young man, but when he lashed out, the horses ran away. Yet when he talked softly, the horses

came to him. “At the end of the session, he was a changed kid,” Chuck said. “He came out understanding that if he was nice to his friends, rather than violent toward them, he’d get better results. The therapist said to me, ‘How’d you get those horses to do that?’ I told him, ‘You know what? You’ve just seen God at work.’”

These remarkable things happen at Hooves of Heaven, which is located in a rural setting on the Mattke family farm east of WaKeeney near the community of Ogallah, which has a population of perhaps 25 people. Now, that’s rural.

For more information, go to hoovesofheaven.com.

Hooves and heaven. We commend Chuck Mattke and all those involved with Hooves of Heaven for making a difference with equine-assisted learning. I think the results are heavenly.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.