



WHAT'S WORKING

A Message from
DJJ Director Andy Block

Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice

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Residents Learn Some Horse Sense



Unit 66 Coordinator Sloan Takes 3 Youth To “Wings Of Hope” Ranch

The young man in Community Coordinator Kristle Sloan’s Unit 66 had just come back from a particularly frustrating day in his geometry class. He stated flatly that he didn’t understand it, and he was not going to work on it anymore.

But then Sloan reminded him about the recent trip they had taken to the Wings of Hope horse ranch near Montpelier. “Remember how your horse wouldn’t budge until you put forth some effort to get him moving?” Sloan asked him. The young man softened, smiling at the memory.

“We told him once the horse started moving again, it wasn’t so hard to keep him moving,” Sloan says. “We said geometry is like your horse: You’re going to have to put forth some hard effort, and it will continue to move.” The resident agreed, and he and Sloan put together a plan to start working on geometry again.



DJJ residents and rescue horses provided therapy for each other at a recent visit to Wings of Hope Ranch near Montpelier. Below left: Unit 66 Community Coordinator Kristle Sloan and Resident Specialist II Latisha Ellis.

This was just the result Sloan was hoping for when she first heard about Wings of Hope Ranch. “I did some research on the ranch and also animal therapy, and decided it would be a valuable experience for the residents in our community,” she says. “Most of our residents have histories of verbal, physical, and sexual abuse and are in need of positive ways to heal.”

Sloan contacted Ranch Executive Director Alison Boyd and explained the backgrounds of the residents. “She was really excited,” Sloan recalls. “She said this is what the ranch is for: to help children through the horses.”

Sloan took three residents who earned the trip through phase promotion and good behavior. After grooming, saddling and bridling the horses, residents were taught basic handling and riding skills.

It’s especially appropriate that these horses and residents should be paired, since the ranch rescues horses who themselves have been through some kind of abuse or trauma.



“We paralleled the hard life of each horse and how the caring staff of Wings of Hope Ranch didn’t give up on them,” Sloan says. “They continue to work with the horses even after setbacks. As the residents were providing therapy to the horses, we reminded them that many therapies were available to them as well to help them return to the community.”

One young man who was

formerly an instigator of negative behavior is now very involved in the daily functions of Unit 66. He helps staff with the implementation of circle-ups and check-ins, takes a leadership role with younger residents, and has high hopes for his next serious offender review in November.

“I’m glad ya’ll didn’t give up on *me*,” the young man told Sloan after the trip.



“It was a blessing to have had the opportunity to minister to the residents who visited our ranch to spend time with our volunteers and rescue horses. It is amazing to see how quickly a horse can break down barriers and bring out the best in all of us, which is what we experienced and witnessed this day.”

*– Alison Boyd
Executive Director
Wings of Hope
Ranch*

