

STABLE LIFE OFFERS TRAIL TO FOLLOW FOR THOSE FACING LIFE'S CHALLENGES

By Kathleen McGwin

"The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others." Mahatma Gandhi

Sometimes you meet someone or visit a place that is so real, so honest, so authentic, that you leave having hope, once again, for the future of the world and trust in the goodness of humankind. Stable Life and its founder, Joann Stephens, are of this ilk, true to their mission and gently accepting of those who come seeking solace from an often unkind world.

Stable Life is a non-profit organization located in Marquette County, just northwest of Westfield, on ten wooded acres that shelter a small herd of horses, llamas and one donkey that deeply touch the lives of folks looking for a path through the challenges of mental illness or just cloudy days that life presents to all of us at times.

Simply stated, the goal of the organization is "to give individuals the tools they need to create for themselves a stable life." Its mission, "to enhance recovery and the quality of life for persons affected by mental, emotional, trauma and substance use disorders through self-determination and empowerment, and through family and community education, acceptance, and support."

"All he wanted to do was watch video games," said Hope Fischer, talking about her son, Benjamin, as she watched him teach his younger brother to clean the hooves of Dino, a fleabait grey 14-year-old Arabian gelding and a favorite horse among the youth who regularly participate in Stable Life's equine activity program. "He came out here under protest, only agreeing to drop his sister off, and stayed to help fix a feeder. And it happened. Apache pressed his head right into Benjamin's chest and he was hooked."

The positive changes in 16-year-old Benjamin are too many to list, insisted his mother at a recent family day at Stable Life, and include a 40 pound weight loss, heightened interest in school, improved grades, and a passion for volunteering at Stable Life and caring for horses. Today, instead of hours behind a computer screen, Benjamin can be found grooming horses, experimenting with recipes for a triple layered chocolate cake he baked and brought to the family outing day at Stable Life, and thinking about what career he might choose as an adult. He's personable, friendly, helpful and confident – and devoted to the equine program that has made such a big change in his life.

Founder Joann Stephens knows about the challenges, pain and frustration, especially those that go with trying to maneuver through

a culture and system that at times misdiagnoses, blames, ignores, or washes its hands of fellow citizens who struggle with the confusion, pain and challenges of depression, anxiety, or other mental health issues. She generously shares her personal story with others in her extensive work in the field, which includes being a board member of the National Alliance of Mental Illness Wisconsin, President and Manager of Stable Life, and past long-time member and co-chair of the Wisconsin Council on Mental Health and chair of its criminal justice committee.

Stephens is a frequent speaker on mental illness topics and offers advice to human service professionals and their work with clients. Her personal story holds at its heart the deaths of two children, the struggle of another child with mental illness, and her own depression and suicidal thoughts. Through it all, she has held onto a desire and worked extremely hard to make it better, both her own and her daughter's lives, and to find a way for others to do the same. Thus, Stable Life, a place and program that offers just that.

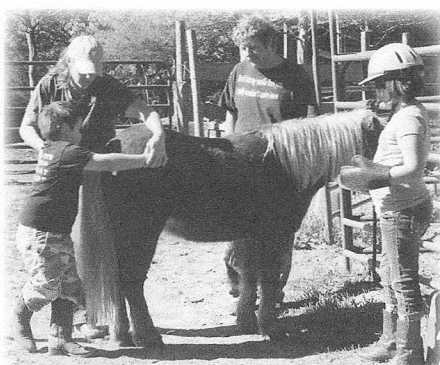
"Through all my studying about and working to learn about what was happening to us, I received the tools that were necessary for both of us to navigate the mental health system and to direct our treatment and lives," Stephens says in her personal story. "This transformation has enabled us both to alter the limitations that were previously set by our illnesses. We went from passive recipients in our services to active participants in our recovery. We were no longer victims of our illnesses."

Experienced with horses, Stephens turned to them again when, as a young mother, she lost a child and faced growing concerns about a daughter who struggled to cope at school and with life. With her husband by her side, she fought her way back to mental health and helped her daughter do the same using work with horses as a firmly rooted routine that brought balance and comfort.

Now she shares that with others and lets her guidance and the magic of horses bring people to realize how much in control they are of their own lives and their own serenity.

"The bulk of my work is simply helping folks access the resources and services they need and educating professionals on how to be recovery focused in the services they provide", she says. "I started the equine therapy part of the business because I know how powerful the connection is between a person and a horse. I have always been complimented for the confidence I display, even when I'm feeling completely opposite inside. I attribute this to growing up with horses and learning to develop the leadership skills necessary to work with them. The equine therapy is a tool in my wellness toolbox. Without it I would not be able to function as well as I do."

Stable Life operates an equine activity program almost exclusively on donations and the labor of participants and volunteers. Fees are based on ability to pay and most services are at



Rhonda Hyatt, 9, from Coloma, stands at Pickles the pony's head while Joann Stephens teaches Daniel Fischer, 6, how to safely walk around the back of a horse while Jeremiah Fischer looks on. Safety is top priority at the non-profit Stable Life that offers equine activities. Younger participants are paired with older, more experienced participants after rules are reviewed before each activity.

no or low cost to participants. The equine activity program helps people develop lifelong skills, said Stephens, including assertiveness, confidence, increased self-esteem, problem solving, leadership, and mentor skills.

The website says, "They say the kitchen is the hub of the home. At Stable Life the Round Pen is the hub of the Farm. During group activities and discussion time participants are with their horses, while discussing life issues as a group. Participants work with the horse of

their choice doing whatever activity they chose around the round pen. The focus is based on recovery, problem solving, action planning, and individual and group accountability. Each participant brings a wealth of knowledge and rich lived experience to the discussion and support is peer based."

Stable Life also helps professionals, para-professionals, and family members learn about mental illness, experience and observe services that can change the lives of those they work with, and those who are interested in equine therapy. Stephens will be doing Trauma Informed Care (TIC) trainings with Hope House teaching faith-based leaders about Trauma in both Columbia and Marquette Counties this fall. Another fall TIC training will be for foster parents and workers in the foster system for Columbia County and for Sauk County Human Services

Equine therapy has become a recognized method for treating mental health issues, as well as physical disability and brain injury. At Stable Life, there are dozens of people who will attest to how the work and experiences on this wooded ten acres have helped them in their lives.

Sometimes you meet someone who changes lives through quiet, kind, and generous actions they take purely out of love for others and because they have come through the darkest of times themselves. They do it because they know that to make the world a better place, you share with others. Stable Life is a place like that and Joann Stephens is a person like that – one that lifts us all a little closer to grace.

For more information about Stable Life or to donate time or financial support, go to www.stablelife.org. You can also learn all about its founding, mission, and purpose. Visit and you can witness those words come to life in the patience

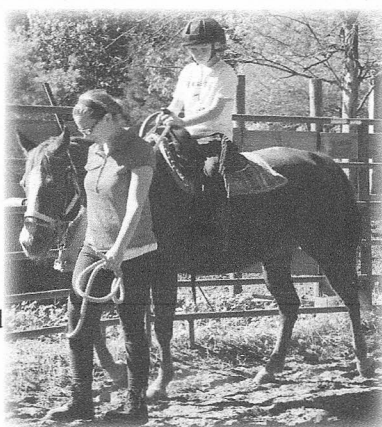
of the volunteers and founder, joy in the eyes of a troubled child, quiet resolve in the actions of a teen who has learned that grooming a horse and caring for an animal helps, in some way, to care for their own soul, putting life in perspective and pain in the distance. See families come together in outdoor fun and relaxation and watch what life can be like when it is ordered and calm, quiet and good.



The equine activity program at Stable Life isn't just fun, it's work, too, and participants learn about responsibility and commitment before getting to ride on a horse. Daniel and Eric Fischer from Oxford clean up after grooming the horse they will soon be riding. The Fischer family finds Stable Life "a special place" for their family, said mom Hope.



Founder and president of Stable Life, Joann Stephens, teaches Eric Fischer how to organize bridles and halters that will be used during family day in the equine activities at the non-profit.



Brianna Bohringer, 19, has been volunteering at Stable Life for two years and recently was "buddied" with Ashton King, 9, during a Family Day at the non-profit equine activity organization.