



Community Profile: Brook Hill Farm

By Mark Thomas, Community Relations Coordinator

Editor's note: The names of the teens in the story were changed to protect their identity.



Started in 2001, Bedford County's Brook Hill Farm offers programs to help horses and people. Jo Anne Miller was one of the founders and is the executive director.

Out in the Bedford County countryside is a healing place for those with struggles.

Located in the Forest community in the western end of Southside Electric Cooperative's service area, Brook Hill Farm provides a path toward a successful future for rescued horses and at-risk teenagers. Uniquely, they are matched together to aid each's recovery.

“An abused horse and an abused child get along great. They understand each other,” says Jo Anne Miller, one of Brook Hill’s founders and its executive director.

Situated on 60 acres, Brook Hill doesn’t analyze the struggles the horses and teens have experienced. That’s been done. Miller says most of the kids are tired of explaining how they feel. Brook Hill works to teach the teens coping strategies, life skills, confidence, honesty and work ethic, all in a loving, but accountable, family environment.

“I love it,” adds 17-year-old Mary. “Everyone accepts you for who you are.”

For Mary, that’s been a life largely lived without her parents. She’s grown up while living with other relatives. She says coming to Brook Hill has helped her become more comfortable about not having a relationship with her mom and dad.

“We bonded very quickly,” Mary says about her horse, 20-year-old Libby, who she calls mama. They ride and participate in jumping competitions. After graduating from high school this spring, Mary plans to attend college and become a veterinary technician.

Brook Hill Farm started in 2001 as a horse rescue and rehabilitation center and has evolved to have several programs, including therapeutic riding for people with disabilities, one-day and summer community outreaches to teach children about horses and an internship opportunity for college students. Brook Hill continues the horse rescue and rehabilitation program.

The combined horse and teen program is called United Neigh. Students ages 12- 21 from Campbell, Appomattox, Bedford and Amherst counties and the city of Lynchburg are paired with horses, some that have come through rescue and rehabilitation.

On a late-October afternoon, Mary and four other girls have come to the Bellevue Road farm for the second of their two visits during the week. They get tutoring help with their studies, if needed, and a snack, do chores around the barn, and then work with their horses, including grooming them and cleaning their hooves. There’s also time to give their 1,000-pound friends a carrot and some love.

The horses at Brook Hill Farm don’t get all of the carrots.



Then, it's time to saddle up and head out to the riding ring.

Twenty-four teens are now in the program. Most are female. Miller attributes that to the interest girls have in horses. They come to Brook Hill with a variety of struggles, from living in an economically disadvantaged home to battling anxiety or a health condition to running afoul of the law to having dealt with abuse. The teens spend about 10 hours a week at the farm.

The horses, Miller says, come from around the country and have been given up by owners, been injured, rescued from mistreatment or run their last race. Their care includes a plan to get them healthy and ready to participate in United Neigh or one of Brook Hill's other programs or be adopted. Brook Hill has 37 horses now, including Devon, Cruiser, Sabu, John Boy and Patrick.

In the United Neigh program, teens get help with schoolwork, have a snack, do chores around the barn and then have time with their horses.



"He's my eyes, regardless if I'm holding a lead rope or in the saddle," 18-year-old Jennifer says about her horse, Mystic, who's recovered from a knee injury that required surgery. "He looks out for me and protects me." Jennifer is legally blind.

Betsy, who's 12, faces a lot of teasing and other students making fun of her at school. She says Brook Hill has helped her deal with the teasing and has built her confidence. As they get ready to ride this particular October day, the other girls put their arms around Betsy's shoulders and tell her she has their support.

"It is like a family," Jennifer says.

Adds 15-year-old Linda, who's struggling with family health issues, "Nobody judges you." She says the thing she likes best is the closeness between the girls and how they can share with each other.

Lisa, 14, was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes when she was 9 and, one year later, was diagnosed with numerous food allergies. She experienced anxiety and depression. Lisa is direct about how Brook Hill has helped.

“It’s pretty much saved my life.”

Lisa’s mom, who’s among the several hundred people who volunteer at the farm every year, says her daughter is different now that she comes to Brook Hill. She says Lisa can take her anger and emotions and channel them into her riding, instead of getting in trouble. Lisa, her mom adds, has learned that besides taking control of a 1,000-pound horse, she can also take control of situations in her life and flourish.



Teens in the United Neigh program become friends with each other and their horses. Before getting saddled for a ride, horses in Brook Hill Farm’s United Neigh program enjoy a thorough brushing.

“She’d live here if they’d let her,” her mom explains. She jokes that Lisa will gladly muck horse stalls, but won’t clean her room as readily.

Now, you might think the mood would be a little sad, a bit solemn in Brook Hill’s red barn, what with the serious issues the teens are facing. It’s just the opposite. There’s lots of happy conversation, laughter, singing and just a bit of age-appropriate silliness.

“They feel like they can be themselves,” says Miller, who has a degree in education and teaches equine science at Randolph College in Lynchburg.

Part of that is certainly due to their four-legged friends. Miller and Tracy Russler, the assistant director, and two other staff work to match the girls and horses. For example, they paired a teen who was anorexic with a horse that was malnourished. Eating plans were developed for both. Miller says they recovered nicely. In another case, a teen with a lack of confidence was put with an assertive horse.

Miller says horses can read and respond to a person’s body language. She recalls a young man who came to Brook Hill after being sexually abused. She says he acted tough and like “a manly man.” Going into the ring one day, he spent three unsuccessful hours trying to catch one of the horses. Frustrated, the teen sat down in the middle of the ring and broke down emotionally. The horse he’d been trying to catch then came over to console him. She says the horse no longer saw him as a threat.



With chores finished, it's time to enjoy a late-afternoon ride.

"If you're threatening, they're not going to be around you," Miller adds.

Miller says she doesn't know of another program like United Neigh. It's unique, she adds, because it combines traditional tutoring with the horse training and because the teens stay in the program for several years. United Neigh is accredited through Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International.

Since Brook Hill started, 448 horses have been adopted out to new homes.

A total of 113 teens have graduated from United Neigh since it began in 2002. Every teen who has stayed in the program has graduated from high school or gotten a General Educational Development (GED) credential, gone on to college or technical school or into some profession.

"We want to give them someone who believes in them," Miller says.

For teen or horse, that's a key to getting on the road to success.

A nonprofit, Brook Hill Farm is funded through grants, donations, fundraising and tuition. Many of the teens are on scholarship.

For more information, visit www.brookhillfarm.org.

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