



Spirit of the Horse

Participants gain insight into their own lives through working with miniature horses. **Carla Lowe**

Kim Shook was a corporate executive for McDonald's; her husband Todd, a registered nurse at Bronson Hospital. Her 20-year career in information technology working for Fortune 100 companies gave Kim an impressive list of accomplishments, including responsibility for preparing all of McDonald's computers for the much anticipated Y2K transition. She was a highly successful professional, and yet struggled deeply on an emotional level.

Kim and some friends decided to get away to the renowned Miraval Spa in Arizona. Before leaving, they were encouraged to see the horses at Miraval, and acting on that advice led to one of the most spiritual and life-changing events of Kim's life.

Kim had what she describes as a "tremendous fear of horses." She confronted that fear by enrolling in a workshop at Miraval that required participants to groom and clean the horses, and then chose the largest horse to groom. As she approached the horse to grab his hoof, a wave of panic swept over her. The horse sensed her anxiety and refused the grooming. She recalls Wyatt Webb, the program facilitator, asking her, "Who in your life was controlling towards you?" In that one moment, which she considers "a gift from the universe," Kim experienced a deep epiphany about her childhood and became incredibly empowered to change her life.

A year before the Miraval experience, Kim and Todd purchased a summer home and land in Mattawan. Todd kept telling Kim that their land "needed to have purpose." Over the next two years, she continued commuting to her Chicago-based job while considering what they might do with the land. That purpose began to take shape following a trip to the county fair in August 2000, when Kim and Todd purchased a miniature horse named Peanut.

One horse eventually became seven, and Bella Terra Acres was born. Italian for "beautiful land," Bella Terra was developed

into the first equine experiential program that utilizes miniature horses exclusively. With EAGALA (Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association) certification, Kim and Todd began to offer experiential equine experiences to corporate businesses, nonprofit organizations, youth groups and families.

In building the program, Kim wanted participants to really relate to the horses, similar to her own experience at Miraval.

"Horses are empathetic," she explains. "They can feel what people feel long before we put our emotions into action. Because of this, horses provide unbiased feedback and are only concerned with clearly understanding what we are asking of them and finding congruence with what we are feeling and how we are acting." Built on a deep spiritual philosophy of "no judgment," the program requires no previous experience with horses and allows participants to gain insight into their own lives through a learning experience with the animals.

Typical activities at Bella Terra include "Catch and Halter," where participants choose a horse, groom it and put on the halter. There is no right or wrong way to halter the horse, Kim says, as long as it works appropriately for the participant.

In an activity called "Billiards," pockets are created in open spaces of the farm and people have to "shoot" the horses into the pockets with their energy and communication.

During "Life's Little Obstacles," par-

ticipants name an obstacle that they are facing. With one minute to plan, they must figure out a way to get the horse to jump over a hurdle, a metaphor for overcoming their own hurdles.

During the various experiences, people gain insight into their own behaviors, communication styles, challenges, fears, problem solving skills, and creativity. Prior to beginning a group experience, the Shooks do a needs assessment to determine the most appropriate activities to help each group meet its goals. Afterwards, a debriefing session helps identify strengths and areas for improvement. A 30-to-60 day action plan is developed and follow up is provided.

Kim's corporate management experience, combined with a new passion for horses, has changed her life.

"I could no longer live my life without the spirit of the horse," she shares. She is currently working with a team of seven other individuals from around the country to develop more equine training programs that will help other people enjoy the kind of life-changing experience that made Kim the person she is today.

For more information on Bella Terra, visit www.bellaterrainc.org.



Horses can "feel" what people feel. Below: The "Billiards" activity.

