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# FREEDOM HORSES

by Dutch Henry

## Healing Hearts with Horses

One in four American women have been the victim of mental, physical or sexual abuse. That's a staggering and sobering statistic, isn't it? For years, Betsi Bixby has wanted to find a way to help these women heal. Betsi had never been a victim of abuse; in fact, as she will tell you in her upbeat and cheerful way, she has had a rich and rewarding life, filled with love and blessings. It was some time ago that she heard a particularly upsetting story that just wouldn't let go. The story haunted her. As time went on, she heard others. "I remember wondering then if God was sending me a hint," Betsi said.

Being a lifelong horsewoman, she is well aware of the healing spirit of the horse, and she had seen the wonders of equine assisted therapy. It was at a benefit ride for Morning Star Ranch, a therapeutic riding center that's devoted to helping at-risk children, that a plan began to take shape. When she saw the wondrous change come over the children at Morning Star Ranch, she asked herself, "Why can't we do this for abused women?"

A few months later, Betsi had the opportunity to hear Monty Roberts speak. "When he spoke about reaching out and helping others, I felt as if he was talking directly to me," Betsi said. "I thought about the past few months, the stories I'd heard, the Morning Star Ranch, and now Monty's talk. I felt as if God was nudging me to get moving. As if he was asking me to help these women who were afraid to ask for help."

Betsi knew she would need a reliable conduit to reach women who were enduring abuse or had been abused and were unable to let go. Sadly, often getting over the abuse is harder than getting out of the abuse. She approached Freedom House, a marvelous organization that is devoted to helping abused women and girls cope with the wounds their abuse had left them with. Betsi's plan to use horses and let the women feel the healing powers in a horse's heart was received with so much enthusiasm at Freedom House that they started working on plans to make it happen right away. A dedicated group of about 12 women quickly banded together to make the idea a reality.

Many times, abused women will turn inward, putting up a hard exterior. It is not uncommon for them to forget how to smile. Forget how to feel happy. Forget how to make decisions. They can become so conditioned, beaten down physically and mentally, they simply forget how to make choices. Many not only forget how to make choices; they lose the ability to even think they should be allowed to make choices. Even crueler, they can lose the ability to love. Or accept love. A problem often seen in typical therapy is that battered women and girls learn to move on, sort of, but often don't learn how to open their hearts again. That's where Betsi's plan and the spirit of the horse come in. Betsi knows the spirit of the horse can open their hearts again.



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Within weeks of Betsi's first meeting with Catherine Tietjen of Freedom House, they set up a pilot program and brought the first participant to Tammy Sronce's Echo Ranch in Weatherford, TX and introduced her to Tammy's horse, Memphis. "It was overwhelming," Betsi said. "She stood in the barn and looked at the horse, just looked at him. Then she walked over and touched him. We could almost see the comfort flow from Memphis to the girl."

In the weeks that followed, more women came from Freedom House to Echo Ranch, and the visits began to develop a structure. They generally began with just introducing the women and girls to a horse and simply letting them absorb the horse's spirit, then brushing the horse. They would lead the horse, even saddle, and ride, starting in the ring. If they wanted to, they could go on a supervised trail ride. But everything is the participant's choice. Except for matters of safety, the participants are never told what to do. For many of them, it is the first time in years that they were allowed to, or had the desire to, make a choice. "We can see them gain confidence from the horses, as they interact with them. They relax while they're brushing a horse; sometimes they'll hug and kiss the horse. Often, they'll tell us it was the first time in a long time that they didn't think of their problems," Betsi said.

Participants ranged from 16 to 60 years old, from women who had horses before to those who never did but always dreamed of having one. But one thing was always the same: the women at some point always smiled. "They might smile when they first meet the horse and ask his name, or when they brush him or when they sit in the saddle. But they always smile at some time," Betsi said. "There's a special magic in a horse's spirit that connects and can help heal. Their spirit is the heart of our program. We just put them together." Betsi's program adopted the name Freedom Horses in honor of the work they do at Freedom House.

The beauty of the Freedom Horses program is it is just that: it's a program. A template. "Think of it as Big Brothers and Big Sisters," Betsi said. "Just as they are able to help children anywhere in the country, so do we want to help abused women anywhere in the country." From the beginning, from the very first meeting with Catherine at Freedom House, the plan has been to develop a program that could be used by anyone with the desire to help abused women everywhere.

With Catherine's help, Betsi, Tammy and their volunteers have put together a comprehensive, step-by-step plan that anyone who has the desire to help heal hearts can use with their own horses at their own home. "We call it the Freedom Horses Tool Kit," Betsi said. Everything is charted out, from

how to select and train volunteers to suggestions of activities. "For instance, one thing we have found to really help is involving an equine massage therapist," Betsi explained. "Many abused women do not want to be touched. But something happens when they watch the relaxation come over a horse during a massage. It's often the first time in years they can relate to touching without fear."

Freedom Horses' mission is to help women gain courage, compassion and confidence through interactions with horses and their volunteer owners. Just organized in June,



they already have more volunteer owners ready to welcome women to their barns and experience the healing powers of the spirit of the horse, and two other women's shelters ready to test out the program in their towns. To learn more about Freedom Horses, visit their website [www.freedomhorses.org](http://www.freedomhorses.org)

Freedom Horses started in Weatherford, Texas but is expanding to all states, so whether you are in Texas, Maine, Florida or anywhere in between, if you have a horse that is willing to help heal hearts, reach out to Freedom Horses. They will help you help. 🐾

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