



Street to stable

Mike Sandell, left, grooms In Harmony (in fly mask) at Center at Heron Hill in rural Canby. It was Sandell's first day participating in p:ear's equine therapy program.

PHOTO BY BEN BRINK

A new approach to helping homeless youths heal

BY EMILY GREEN
STAFF WRITER

Mike Sandell was out of his usual element. He emerged from the backseat of a Champagne-gold Suburban, scanning the terrain. He was in the rolling hills of rural Canby, at a ranch where groves of cottonwood, alder and Douglas fir dot an expansive and well-manicured lawn.

As he stood at the foot of Heron Hill, he spotted two Arabian thoroughbreds paddocked on the hillside and made his way toward them. As the 20-year-old trudged up the slope, he relied heavily on a walking cane to alleviate the torn meniscus in his right knee – an injury he says he sustained climbing carelessly onto a bunk bed in a homeless shelter.

Three years earlier, when Sandell was 17, social workers removed him from his parents' home near Los Angeles and placed him with his grandmother in Newberg. Six months later he found a rent-free place to live in Beaverton. It was his ticket out of the small town, which he says, "sucks."

The living situation didn't last and the space he'd occupied at his grandmother's had since been filled. He was able to find employment as a substitute educator, working with kids in special education

programs, but it wasn't enough money to get him into housing.

According to U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's annual report to Congress in 2014, 60 percent of Oregon's 1,096 unaccompanied homeless youth were sleeping outside on a single night in January that year, but Sandell wasn't among them. He had found a new home in Portland's crowded homeless shelters.

It was at a shelter in downtown Portland that Sandell noticed stickers plastered all over the walls and bunk beds depicting p:ear's logo. "What's p:ear?" he asked his bunkmates. "It's this great art space, you should come check it out," someone replied. "The rest," says Sandell, "is history."

P:ear, an acronym for project: education, art, recreation, is a nonprofit in downtown Portland providing homeless youth with opportunities to explore their creative sides, go on field trips in nature. It's also a place to feel normal again and to play games like

Magic and Dungeons and Dragons like other kids their age.

The 2015 Point-In-Time count found on one night in January, in Multnomah County alone, there were 266 unaccompanied youth ages 24 and younger and an additional 369

children living with families who were experiencing homelessness.

At p:ear, about 900 homeless and transitional youth between the ages of 15 and 24 come through its doors each year.

In December, p:ear began to shuttle youth from downtown Portland to The Center at Heron Hill in Canby, a horse ranch where certified therapists use activities with horses to foster healing within clients through its Alliance Counseling program.

Equine therapy programs have been rising in popularity for decades. According to Alliance Counseling and Center at Heron Hill co-owner and director Joyce Korschgen, there are at least 50 equine therapy

"It seems that equine therapy subtly subverts an immediate reaction of distrust towards something by using a very large and noticeable example like a horse. Gaining a mutual trust with something like that can really be comforting."

— CODY SURRATT

providers in the area surrounding Portland.

But she's the first to offer a program specifically for homeless youth – a program she and Robinn Rudd, her partner in life and in business, are offering pro bono to homeless youth in Portland through p:ear.

As Sandell approached the paddock, a fenced enclosure for horses, a bay-colored beauty sauntered up to the fence and nickered a greeting as he began to gently stroke her neck and snout. "I wish I knew your name," Sandell said to her. Today was his first visit to the ranch.

MerriBeth Vaughn, the certified equine specialist facilitating activities with P:ear, says while horse therapy can be extremely beneficial to any disenfranchised group – it doesn't require a lot of talking – she's noticed it's especially effective with the kids from p:ear.

"They get around the horses and you can just feel the tension go out of everybody that's in there," she says. "They all seem like they just give a sigh of relief once they start petting the horses."

Brandon Houston discovered Center at Heron Hill when he visited the ranch for a class he was taking at Lewis & Clark Graduate School. At the time he'd been a volunteer mentor at p:ear for about one

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