

Fostering confidence on horseback

Katie Johnson, 15, organizes horse camp for foster girls

By Angel Carpenter
Blue Mountain Eagle

A 15-year-old Mt. Vernon girl was on a mission, looking for a way to give back to her community, and in her quest she created an opportunity for 11 foster girls to gain confidence through horseback riding.

Katie Johnson, with help from her mother, Angie, established the nonprofit Calvary Horse Camp, inviting girls ages 9-12 to learn how to saddle, mount, ride, dismount, feed and groom horses.

"They have come a long, long way," Katie said on Friday, day five of the camp. "When they first came down, most hadn't touched a horse before."

As she spoke, the girls were walking and trotting their horses around the Grant County Fairgrounds rodeo arena, with several women and teen girls volunteering to assist.

The girls, from Beaverton, Eugene, Pendleton, Grants Pass and Dallas, came July 29 and stayed through Aug. 3.

Upon arriving, each of the 11 participants drew a different colored ribbon, matching up to a ribbon on the horse they would be paired with — for the week, it was "their" horse.

While most of the girls caught on quickly, one girl thought her horse didn't like her and avoided riding for the first two days.

"Now they've bonded, and she's riding on her own," Katie said.

One participant, Michelle, rode an Appaloosa. Her nickname, which she took a liking to, was "Rodeo Queen."

"I enjoyed meeting new people and riding horses," she said. "I've been looking for the perfect job, and I've found it — being a rodeo queen."

Amy said it had been awhile since she'd been on a horse.

"I've ridden a horse before, when I was 6," she said. "For the past few days, it's been great."

Valerie said she'd only ridden a horse once at a summer day camp for arts and technical skills.

"The whole class learned about saddles and horse breeds, and I rode for 10 minutes," she said. "My favorite part of the week was riding April."

After their riding session on Friday, the girls took the horses back to their pens or trailers where they took off the saddle, fed and groomed their animals.

Katie said her idea behind the Calvary Horse Camp was to combine her "two greatest loves."

"I've ridden horses for as long as I can remember, and I love all kids," Katie said.

She and several chaperones and teen staffers were with the girls at all times.

"We have an amazing team of helpers," she said, adding that Julie Bowling, a horse 4-H club adviser, was an especially helpful teacher.

Locals loaned 13 older, gentle horses for the girls to ride during the week.

Pastor Levi Manitsas opened up the Cornerstone Christian Fellowship building in John Day for the girls and chaperones to stay, and Pastor Keith DeHart of Prairie Baptist Church came in each morning and prayed with the team.

The girls had a "tough questions box," and DeHart

would help answer their anonymous questions.

At the end of each day, before bed, Katie and other teen helpers gathered with the girls for tea time, continuing to develop relationships with the girls.

"We talked about highs and lows of the day, mostly building confidence," Katie said.

Twelve-year-old Rowdy Israel of Dayville, recently crowned the 2019 Junior Miss Rodeo Oregon, was among those volunteering in the arena.

Israel said part of her role is sharing the spirit of rodeo.

"A lot of them were new to riding and the Western way of life," she said. "They grew a lot over the week, building bonds with the horses."

She said she enjoyed demonstrating a "rodeo queen's run" with Katie and speaking with the girls about how she competed for the rodeo pageant, and that she didn't win the first time she tried out.

Angie said her daughter earned half the money for the camp with a Fourth of July breakfast fundraiser in Prairie City and a concert featuring the Johnson family and friends at the BMW Motorcycle Rally in June.

The other half of the money came from a GoFundMe campaign.

One anonymous donor sent \$500 in the mail with a note that read, "God answers prayers for your camp."

Katie said she was happy with the outcome of her first horse camp.

"This is my mission without having to go out of the country or overseas," she said. "I can't wait until next year — a new batch of girls to share the love of Christ with."



Eagle photos/Angel Carpenter

Katie Johnson, left, and her friend Amy walk a horse back to its trailer Thursday during the Calvary Horse Camp held at the Grant County Fairgrounds in John Day. Johnson, a Mt. Vernon resident, combined her love of horses and youth to organize the camp to help inner-city girls learn to ride horses. See more photos at myeaglenews.com.



Kiera and her horse Houdini bonded during the weeklong Calvary Horse Camp in John Day.



Rowdy Israel of Dayville, left, high-fives Michelle as Mia rides by. Israel has the title of Junior Miss Rodeo Oregon, and Michelle, nicknamed "Rodeo Queen" during the horse camp, enjoyed learning about the duties of rodeo queen and horsemanship.

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