

# THE HORSE CURE

## TRUE STORIES

Remarkable Horses Bringing  
Miraculous Change to Humankind

Michelle Holling-Brooks  
Photographs by AJ Morey

Lessons in  
EQUINE-PARTNERED  
COUNSELING  
from  
Unbridled Change

PRESS KIT

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\* All photographs  
in this press kit  
by Aj Morey

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**M**ICHELLE HOLLING-BROOKS has over 20 years of experience working as an Equine Professional and Coach in the field of Equine-Assisted Activities and Therapy, specializing in working with clients to heal trauma, post-traumatic stress, and attachment issues. After a life-threatening illness at the age of 13 changed Michelle's life, a horse named Schedule A helped her heal her body, mind, and soul. Michelle is passionate about sharing the lessons horses have taught her about healing and personal growth with her clients and other professionals. She believes that horses provide us all with the gift of awareness, the kindness of unconditional love, and an open challenge to us as humans to step into our own empowered voice.



## ABOUT THE BOOK

**A**SHLEY was locked in closets as punishment, and physically and sexually abused, resulting in an angry and violent child who threatened her adoptive family—until she met Cocoa and Radar, the horses that helped her learn to trust again.

**BRENDA** was diagnosed bipolar and lived through humiliating domestic abuse, but with the help of three horses—Delilah, Wiscy, and Diesel—she established a sense of self-worth, hope for the future, and ultimately, the will to go on.

**NICK** was angry, suicidal, and a veteran with combat PTSD, who now says, "Horses literally saved my life."

Inspired by her own childhood trauma when she spent seven days in a coma, awakened to a severely compromised body and brain, and rebuilt her life with the help of a horse, Michelle Holling-Brooks founded Unbridled Change, a non-profit Equine-Partnered Therapy organization that helps match horses to individuals in need. In her new book she shares amazing stories of the people she's worked with and the "horse cure" that changed their lives.

## ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHER



**AJ**MOREY AJ Morey is about to retire as an English professor and administrator at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, and she has always loved horses. She has published books about the American dream, religion and sexuality, shaken baby syndrome, and vintage photographs of people and their dogs, as well as numerous academic articles on women's literature and religion and literature. After chemotherapy 15 years ago she found herself avoiding reading but completely fascinated by pictures. She picked up a camera and established Free Spirit Photography, LLC, in 2016, and she specializes in photographing equine-human interactions...and anything else that grabs her attention.



## WATCH THE BOOK TRAILER



Survivors of trauma, loss, illness, abuse, stress, and depression can face seemingly insurmountable obstacles. But today, a growing body of scientific evidence suggests that horses play a crucial role in therapy for those struggling with significant psychological and emotional challenges. Horses respond to angry, inhibited, heartbroken, defiant, terrified clients in many different ways, often breaking through defensive barriers via their physical presence, or by pointing to areas of psychological distress not immediately apparent. The horse's response guides the treatment team, as well as the client, in the healing process.

# Q&A WITH MICHELLE HOLLING-BROOKS

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**W**hat is the purpose of the organization Unbridled Change and why did you start it?

Unbridled Change is a non-profit mental health organization whose mission is to provide a place for our clients to find the hope, healing, and growth they have been searching for through the partnership of horses. The way we complete our mission to help our clients is mainly through providing Equine-Partnered Psychotherapy and Coaching. We take mental health therapy out of the office and into the arena or paddock with the horses.

The reason I started Unbridled Change was because I know firsthand the healing that can happen when you work with horses. Life can change in an instant and you can lose trust in yourself, others, and the world around you when it does. Sometimes when that trust is broken it can be hard to accept help from another human; however, we might be willing to accept support from an animal. Horses did that for me. They helped me “cure” myself on many different levels. I wanted to provide a space and program where I could share and others could experience what helped me learn how to heal.

In your book *The Horse Cure* you share the story of how you survived a dramatic illness, which left you in a coma for seven

days, and when you did wake, you were faced with severe damage to your motor skills, vision, hearing, language, and understanding, as well as being paralyzed from the waist down. How did this traumatic event in your life prepare you for the role you now play as the founder of Unbridled Change?

I don't think I would be who I am or doing what I do every day at Unbridled Change without that illness. The moment I was wheeled back into the barn and found comfort in a horse's embrace was the moment my life purpose was born. By the time I was a senior in high school, I knew that all I wanted in life was to help others find the same sanctuary and healing that I had found with horses. I knew that the amazing impact horses had on me could also help others.

I think the experiences I had because of that illness also gave me another gift that took me longer to really understand. That illness gave me a gift of knowing and understanding. I know what it is like to feel lost in a body that will not respond. I know what it feels like to be left without a way to communicate what you need or want on even the smallest level. I know what it feels like to be so angry at the world that you end up feeling nothing. I know what it



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feels like to not want to be alive because the pain (physically and emotionally) is too bad. *And* I also know what it feels like to find your way back to willingness, connection, and love after all that pain. Horses gave me a lifeline through that wild sea of despair, pain, and trauma. Now, as the founder of Unbridled Change, I can offer that same lifeline to our clients so that they too can heal.

*In [The Horse Cure](#), you share some of the experiences you've had with clients and the horses that are a part of the Unbridled Change herd. Why do you feel it is important to tell these stories?*

I think the power of sharing these stories is that they give the reader hope. The

stories let the reader see little bits and pieces of themselves reflecting back through the pages. I also feel that the stories and pictures in *The Horse Cure* give the reader the opportunity to feel and see what partnering with horses for human healing can really look like. By sharing these stories, we can take the mystery out of this type of therapy. Hopefully these stories will open the door for more people to think about working with horses to help them heal.

*You had your own experience with the healing power of horses, and now you've witnessed it again and again. What do you feel it is about horses that helps people struggling with trauma, loss, abuse, stress, and depression? Why are they such an integral part of the therapeutic process?*

Horses are, by nature, sentient beings that want to be in relationship and balance with the world around them. When I was recovering from my illness at 13, I didn't understand humans. They didn't make sense to me because they would say one thing and do something different. I felt at odds with the hu-



man world because most of the time nothing "matched." I couldn't trust it. But I could trust horses. They acted in alignment with the world around them. They didn't lie to me. They didn't judge me for being in a wheelchair or talking differently. They didn't care that I had crazy frizzy hair, was too skinny, or about what I was wearing. They only cared and judged me on one thing: how did I treat them and myself. If I was willing to be trustworthy and respectful with them, ask for my needs fairly and without hurting them, I found out they actually *wanted* to be around me!

I think this natural trait is why horses are such great partners for the therapeutic process. People have the same basic desire to be a part of a "herd." We, like horses, are not designed to be alone and without connections. Like horses, we also want to feel safe in that connection. When you combine the therapeutic process with building a relationship with a horse based on trust, respect, and willingness, you have a way for the client to actually see their own patterns in relationships. In these interactions, the client has a chance to discover any "blocks" that might be preventing them from stepping into a healthy relationship. Additionally, they have the option to practice their skills by working through those blocks. The "therapy" then happens organically, in the moment based on the horse interaction and then processing with the mental health professional on the team.

*The kind of healing you engage in at Unbridled Change does not involve riding, which may be the more recognized form of equine therapy. How does working with horses on the ground impact an individual, physically and mentally?*

Riding is amazing and I honor that it was through riding multiple times a week that I gained the use of my legs back. Riding is also something that I love and enjoy and even include sometimes in our therapy sessions, usually around goals such as working on executive functioning skills and building self-confidence. Our form of equine therapy is conducted mostly on the ground, especially at the start of a client's journey with us. We focus on asking the client to learn how to build a relationship with a horse at liberty, meaning free from ropes and halters, based on trust, respect, and willingness. Focusing on groundwork allows us to accomplish the main goal of helping the client focus on healing and not what the client can get the horse to do.

Another reason we work on the ground is for the emotional and physical safety of the clients and horses. By working on the ground, our clients have the opportunity to gain confidence and explore their trauma where both the horse and the client are free to give honest feedback and respond to each other's energy truthfully. We want the horses and the clients to have the ability to choose if they want to participate in a relationship and not feel forced to interact or complete a task "just because." Staying

## Q&A WITH MICHELLE HOLLING-BROOKS

on the ground also provides an opportunity for both horse and human to work through the steps of building a healthy relationship. Clients quickly learn that if they want to be taken seriously by the horses they will need to develop and practice healthy relationship skills, such as how to set boundaries, that it is okay to feel worthy of receiving and asking for respect, and to be willing to trust another being.

In our sessions, clients also have opportunities, through interactions with the horses, to become aware of what their body is feeling, and what their thoughts are in that moment. If they don't like either of those or they realize a thought or belief system is not working for them, they have a chance to brainstorm and come up with a different approach. There is something empowering about building a relationship with thousand-pound beings to the point where they are choosing to walk freely with you through an obstacle course or stop when you ask them to stop. You begin to realize that you *do* have a voice, you are worthy of love, and someone is willing to listen to your lead.

How does working with clients impact the horses, physically and mentally? Are some horses right or wrong for this "job"? How do you choose the members of your herd?

We have seen that working with our clients can impact our horses in both healthy and unhealthy ways. I think the easiest framework to use when thinking about horses employed in equine therapy sessions is to look at our human selves. Those who work in any "helping" field are susceptible to what is called "compassion fatigue." Think of being a caregiver to someone you love. There are huge amazing rewards to that job and you can feel great about it. However, it is stressful and can feel demanding and draining at times. You can end up burning out, having stress-related illnesses, and not wanting to do your job any more. These same signs can turn up in horses that do equine therapy if their human partners do not know how to support them in releasing the emotions and stress that come during the therapy sessions. Just like the mental health and equine professional, horses are holding that same space for their clients because *they want to*. Just like we humans need to have a holistic approach to wellness, so do the horses. For our horses, that wellness routine includes a good diet and exercise program, down time, energy and body work, along with having an excellent bond and relationship with me as their equine professional so they can feel safe in sessions with clients.

Not every horse is right for equine ther-



apy. Just like humans, there are great counselors and those that wouldn't be good at all in that role. We choose our herd of equine partners by looking for those horses that have a desire to be part of multiple relationships and show an ability to handle the emotional stress of "holding space" for a client that is working through trauma. Not every horse wants to work on building trust with more than one human, let alone do it with a couple of clients a day. The horses that we partner with have shown a talent and willingness to be in relationships with many different people.

**How do you keep the horses and the clients safe during therapy sessions?**

One of the things we look for in our horse partners is a willingness to follow our code of conduct: they can say no, they can refuse to work with a client, but they can't aggressively express that opinion by kicking out or biting. I also



will only bring horses in to a session if and when they have built a solid foundation of trust and respect with me as their leader. This allows me the ability to redirect the horse from anywhere in the arena at liberty. If I don't feel that they respect my leadership or that I can call them back to me no matter what is happening with the client or other horses in the arena, then I don't believe they are mature enough to safely be in sessions with a client.

**Who do you feel is a good candidate for Equine-Partnered Counseling?**

Like any method or type of therapy, I believe that we can all benefit from Equine-Partnered counseling at different times in our life. I think the key is that clients must be willing to be honest with themselves. I have found that horses are willing to stick with a client pretty much through any issue, as long as the client has a desire to learn how do some of the "work."

**Your book is called *The Horse Cure*. Is it truly possible for horses to "cure" us when we are struggling with hardship in our lives?**

The word "cure" means to help relieve anything that is troublesome or detrimental. I believe that horses can open the door and help show our clients how to heal from a past that is holding them back from

## Q&A WITH MICHELLE HOLLING-BROOKS

believing in themselves and their amazing power.

The hours and hours I spent in the pasture with horses in between riding lessons and training sessions is where I truly found the safe connections that helped me learn how to heal my own mind and spirit, and set the foundation that allowed my physical body to heal. When I was with the horses I felt that I was safe, supported, and accepted for who I was. In those pastures, I learned the rules of being in a relationship with them and myself. Horses helped me unlock my own ability to "cure" myself. I learned to find strengths that I didn't know I had. I learned how to forgive myself and them, and try again if we made a mistake. Horses taught me to believe that we *all* have the power to cure ourselves.

**What is one thing you hope readers take away from your book?**

My hope is twofold. One, that the connections readers have to the people I introduce them to in *The Horse Cure* help to break through any sense of isolation that so often comes from experiencing trauma and give them hope that they are not alone. Second, I want to open a



doorway into sharing what Equine-Partnered Counseling can look like. I've been in this field close to 20 years now, and the top questions I'm always asked are the same: What *is* equine-assisted counseling? How does it work? Can horses really help someone change and heal? I thought, "Wow, wouldn't it be great if someone wrote a book that answered all those questions in a way that someone would actually read it!" My hope is that *The Horse Cure* does just that and helps bring awareness to the power of partnering with horses for human healing.

[UNBRIDLEDCHANGE.ORG](http://UNBRIDLEDCHANGE.ORG)

# Q&A WITH PHOTOGRAPHER AJ MOREY

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**H**ow did you find your way into the world of Equine-Partnered Counseling?

I've always loved horses, but didn't start riding until midlife. Just being with my horse was calming and gave me a quiet space away from routine cares. I wondered what would happen if I couldn't ride—how could I still have horses in my life in a meaningful way? So, I did some research, and that's how I discovered an organization named EAGALA that was offering seminars and certification on how horses can become therapeutic partners. That's also where I met Michelle Holling-Brooks. She knew everything about horses that I still didn't grasp, and I wanted to learn from her. By this time I'd come off a horse more than once by my mid-sixties, so moving toward a different relationship with horses seemed like a really healthy idea. I was hooked!

In your book *The Horse Cure* you share photographs of what appear to be emotional interactions between horses and humans. Some might read these as demonstrations of the horses' understanding and empathy. Do you believe horses understand how humans are feeling when in their presence? Is this important to therapeutic work or not?

Many horses do indeed respond to hu-

man emotions with kindness and insight. This is true whether you are with a horse for explicit therapeutic purposes or for work (ie, competition, ranch work, trail riding) or just for the pure pleasure of their company.

Horses understand a great deal about our emotional landscape, as Michelle's remarkable stories, shared in *The Horse Cure*, demonstrate, and horses respond honestly to what they sense. It takes several elements for growth to emerge from these sessions. The most important element is partnering with the right horse. Not all horses are suitable for this kind of work. Another element is the presence of a gifted equine specialist, who makes sure both horses and clients are safe in their interactions. A third element is the presence of a gifted mental health practitioner who supports clients as they emerge toward their own insight. And the fourth element is a client who is willing to engage and offer honest effort and self-reflection. As you'll see in Michelle's stories, what the client describes in the encounter with the horse is taken at face value. There's no wrong interpretation. Similarly, the horse's response is taken at face value. There's no wrong equine interpretation either. These elements are integral to the success of Equine-Partnered Psychotherapy, and the horse is essential.



What is it like to photograph these interactions between horse and human?

As much as I love horses, I'm not a natural when it comes to communicating with them, much to my dismay. So much of what they offer is subtle, and horses communicate with each other through body language, not all of which is immediately obvious to us. Photography has opened up my own awareness of just how expressive horses can be. I find it incredibly moving to be able to record some of the ways children and adults connect with horses. Keep in mind that my photographs are not taken during actual counseling sessions. My photos come primarily from equine-partnered coaching events, something that church, school, or civic groups, for example, may elect to experience in order to improve group communication and strengthen personal confidence. And sometimes I take pictures when I'm hanging around the barn with friends. Recording the joyful, inquiring, and brave



moments of people encountering horses, sometimes for the first time, makes me very happy.

Why do you feel it is important to share the stories and photographs in *The Horse Cure* with others?

The stories are the reason for the book. The photographs are a further way of bringing the generosity of the horse into view as something anyone could experience and grow from. We want people to see what this unique therapy has to offer, and we want multiple ways to show how beautiful this therapeutic world can be. "Beauty" is any quality that pleases the senses and uplifts the mind and spirit. We don't usually speak of intense mental health practices in terms of "beauty," but the powerful aesthetics of these interactions summons exactly that word from all the pain and complexity encountered along the way. Neither Michelle's stories nor my pictures avoid the challenges inherent in bringing distressed people into contact with horses. We want to show that the beauty and hope is real, no matter what the obstacles seem to be.

What do you feel it is about horses that helps people struggling with trauma, loss, abuse, stress, and depression? Why are they such an integral part of the therapeutic process?

The size, power and beauty of the horse, along with the many exalted mythical and symbolic meanings assigned to "horse," are part of the richness of this therapy.

To be able to communicate with a horse

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and understand yourself differently as a result is a remarkable kind of empowerment for most people. Working with horses requires some physical investment and that's very important. It asks for movement from people who feel frozen or paralyzed in their current life. Clients are asked to interact with horses on the ground in different ways, so there is physical movement built into each session. What happens to the body happens in the mind, and vice versa. That's how trauma takes hold so fiercely in the first place. Equine-Partnered Psychotherapy and Coaching reunites the body with the mind. It's not about talking, it's about doing.

Your book is called *The Horse Cure*. Is it truly possible for horses to "cure" us when we are struggling with hardship in our lives?

"Cure" comes from Latin, and means care, concern, and attention in an effort to remedy detrimental conditions. Yes, horses can cure us in that sense. They can't remove the hardship; they can direct us toward perspectives that suggest a way out and beyond what is troubling us. There's plenty of research that shows that talk therapy alone cannot heal post-traumatic stress, nor does talk therapy plus drug therapy heal it. We also know that some environ-



ments can permanently harm a young mind. There is no "cure" for that damage if we take "cure" to mean a full restoration of healthy function. But by bringing animal spirit close to human spirit, we support clients in finding different ways to respond and process the present, and anticipate and create a better future.

What is one thing you hope readers take away from your book and your photographs?

I hope that readers will hear the stories and view the photos and see (insight) that, in the hands of skilled practitioners, the power, beauty, and hope of Equine-Partnered Psychotherapy and Coaching is accessible to anyone who is willing to embrace change in his or her life.

# EXCERPT

## FROM *THE HORSE CURE*

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Brenda was early for her second session, too. She came into the office, sat in the same spot at the table, and told us she had no questions and nothing to share. I walked us back out to the arena where Delilah and Cocoa Puff were again waiting. We started with the same task: say hello to the horses, then come on back to us. I added this week, "Once you have said, 'Hello,' in whatever way is right for you, we are going to add the next step. Pick a horse and ask her to go to the cone in the middle of the ring and then come to Cami and me. Again, there is no right or wrong, and you can use anything in the arena as a resource to help you if you want." I pointed to the cone in the middle of the ring.

Delilah stood on the far end of the arena, past the cone, facing us. Cocoa Puff was moving along the wall, her head down and her attention on looking for small pieces of hay that might be hidden somewhere in the footing. She was not watching us, nor did she acknowledge us as we came in.

Brenda remained still again, but this time, instead of staring into space, she looked right at Delilah. I'm not sure how long it took, but it felt longer than 10 minutes before Brenda started to walk across the arena toward the gray mare.

Delilah did not move. Her eyes and ears remained locked on Brenda who closed the gap between herself and Delilah. Brenda stopped about 3 feet from the horse. Brenda didn't reach out her hand or make any overture toward Delilah. They stood that way for a few more minutes.

We noticed Brenda was swaying gently back and forth. She shifted her weight from her left foot and back again in a rhythmic motion. Her arms were crossed in front of her chest. Delilah matched Brenda, shifting her weight from one hind foot to the other, swaying her hind end gently back and forth. Cocoa Puff stopped looking for hay and turned to face the pair from the opposite end of the arena. We heard crying, but we couldn't see Brenda's face to confirm it was coming from her.

Then we heard humming—the faint sounds of a tune. Delilah stopped shifting her weight and moved just a few small steps toward Brenda. Slowly the woman lowered one of her crossed arms to her side as she kept humming and swaying. Delilah moved two more strides and stopped within a couple of inches of Brenda. She slowly lowered her head so it was even with Brenda's chest. The swaying and the humming

continued. Delilah reached over and sniffed Brenda's dropped hand. Brenda stopped swaying and touched her back, brushing her hand against the tip of Delilah's nose.

After the brief connection, they both drew back a step. Brenda returned to swaying and humming. Delilah closed her eyes, shifted her weight to one hind leg, and stood quietly.

After a few more minutes, Brenda turned and walked across the arena toward the gate. She stopped and looked at us almost pleadingly.

"Can I go now?" she said. Tear marks streaked her face, and her jaw was trembling.

Brenda reached down and pulled up the sleeves of her hooded jacket. There were two bandages, one around each wrist. Wiscy leaned his head down. With softness and care he gently sniffed both arms then blew his breath softly into her face, just as he had been the entire session. She leaned into him.

"I wasn't going to tell you guys.  
I wasn't going to talk about it."

Brenda looked at us with the same pleading look she had given us when she first started at Unbridled Change.

"He knew the minute I walked in today  
I was hiding something."

Cami asked, "Do you need anything?"

"No. Can I go now, please?"

Cami nodded to me so I walked over, unhooked the chain, and opened the gate. "We will see you next week," I said.

Brenda had not chosen to share her experience with us, and we wanted to respect her privacy and honor her request.

Cami and I watched her walk to her car and exit the parking lot. We turned to each other, and I let out a sigh. "Well, we got some information," I said with relief. "Delilah wants to make a connection and Cocoa is curious. I guess we see what Brenda brings to the next session."

Cami agreed, adding, "If she comes back. I'm not sure she will."



# PHOTOGRAPHS

BY AJ MOREY

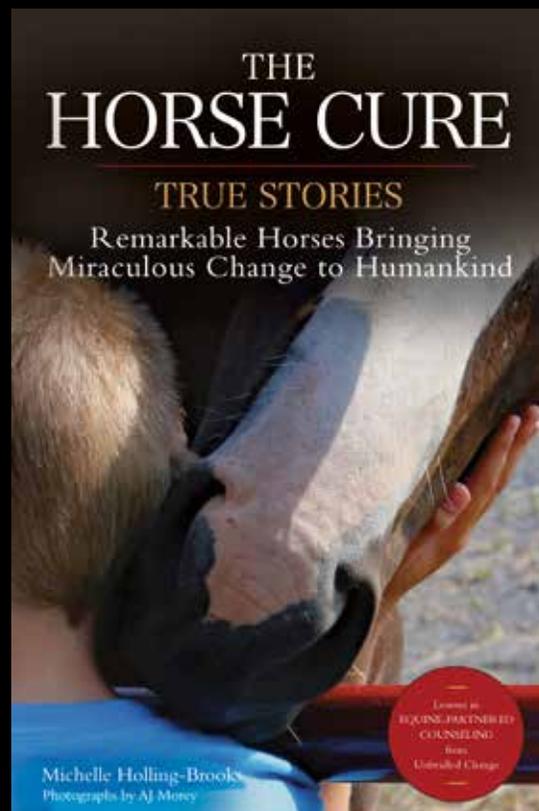


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