

# NO SOUNDNESS REQUIRED

## Retired Racehorses Helping Alzheimers Patients

by Jane Nicholes

For 13 years, Kelly Cox Vicari cared for her mother at home as she deteriorated with Alzheimer's Disease. The small farm in Folsom always had horses on the place, and through trial and error Vicari learned that if her mother was having a bad day, she should send one of her five children out to catch a horse and bring it to the house.

Being in the horse's presence, simply petting it or brushing it, seemed to calm her mother and help her focus on her surroundings. "She changed so instantly," Vicari said. "It was just beautiful to watch the connection."

Eventually her mother passed away, but through word of mouth friends and other contacts asked to bring their relatives who were suffering from Alzheimer's to visit the farm. Vicari said she felt a void after her mother died. "I said, you know, there are only two things I'm good at. One is horses and the other is Alzheimer's. I'm going to put the two things together."

Vicari began to take gradual steps toward formalizing what had become a low-key form of therapy. She had a working relationship with Elite Thoroughbreds LLC. to retrain horses whose racing days were over and who were sound enough to have second careers. But not all of them could be rehabilitated, and it was from among the latter group that Vicari looked for therapy prospects.

What started out as a private service is now a more organized limited liability corporation that will begin charging fees based on how other forms of therapy are priced. "A Lil Bit of Heaven Stables" is the new sign at the farm entrance, and the business name is morphing from Equine Alzheimer's Connection to Equine Therapy Connection.

All of this had been moving forward in March 2020,



Kelly Cox Vicari with retired racehorse Clip Joint, now called Bear. Bear is now a therapy horse.

but the initial plans, like so much else, were stopped cold by the pandemic. A year later, Vicari feels that she's making a fresh start.

There's no riding in Vicari's therapy. People suffering from Alzheimer's or other forms of dementia, especially those who are elderly, can't maintain the

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balance or the concentration necessary to ride. So the horses don't have to be sound, because they don't have to be ridden. They do have to be calm, gentle, unflappable and friendly to humans.

Take Bear. A Louisiana-bred son of 1999 Belmont Stakes winner Lemon Drop Kid, Bear's registered name is Clip Joint. He ran 18 times over three years; all but one start was a claiming race. He won nearly \$41,000 and two races running at Fair Grounds, Delta Downs and Evangeline Downs.

Then Bear was injured and had to be retired. At the time he was partly owned by the bloodstock agent Chad Schumer. Any thought of a second performance career ended for good when he contracted equine protozoal myeloencephalitis (EPM), a disease of the brain and spinal cord. Bear can never be ridden again. But his interaction with Alzheimer's patients is remarkable, Vicari says.

Bear, now 7, was her first therapy horse. Asked how she picks out therapy candidates from among the retired horses at Elite Thoroughbreds, Vicari can't really explain it. She can just tell, she says, within 20 minutes. Bear kept following her around in spite of his then poor condition. “He came here falling down with EPM.”

A filly by Flat Out, with the race name Trattoria, ran one time at Delta and bowed a tendon so badly it wasn't known if she could be saved. “Chanel” as Vicari renamed her, lay down in her stall for hours at a time. When she finally started feeling better, it turned out that Chanel needed considerable work in the calming down department.

“I brought her home and she turned out to be a wild thing. I would have never guessed that she would turn out to be the best therapy horse I have,” Vicari said. “She is bombproof. Nothing scares her.”

A year later, the filly came sound enough that Vicari's 14-year-old daughter Korrine has started her in eventing. Chanel is jumping two feet and learning dressage in addition to learning her manners as a therapy horse.

Vicari keeps three or four therapy horses at a time. Training is handled slowly. It includes exposure to new things and touching, because much of the client's therapy is touching the horse.

“Time and trust are monumental in training them,” she says. “The practical side of the training is literally, they're like police horses.” Horses are exposed to tarps, beach balls and whatever might jump out at them during walks on a neighbor's property.

Once trained, horses seem to know that their role is develop special relationships with the Alzheimer's patients, Vicari says.

Before the first visit, Vicari speaks to the main caregiver in advance to learn as much as possible about the client, including his or her memories and physical capabilities. She will meet the client away from the barn and ask about topics like families and children. Then she'll ask if the client would like to see some horses.

Safety is paramount; Vicari will never leave the client alone with a horse, and she will either hold the horse or put it in cross ties. The caregiver is asked to stay for the session. Vicari puts two or three

horses in the barn and waits for the client to gravitate toward one of them. That horse is brought out, and a set of brushes is put out in a specific order.

The client won't realize it, but the order of brushes is actually a memory exercise. There will be questions about the brushes and the order in which they should be replaced. The goals are to work on memory retention and, using the horse, to help the patient focus on the moment and the world around them.

If things are going well and the client is up to it, he or she will be asked about going on a walk with the horse. Some might be interested in playing with the horse in a paddock, or exploring other objects in the old barn that might contain equipment they used at one time in their lives.

The idea is to let the patient experience things, not accomplish a specific goal. It doesn't matter if the patient doesn't put the brushes back in the right order or doesn't want to do something specific during a session. But often what someone does accomplish moves both Vicari and the caregiver to tears. The sessions can take on a spiritual element.

In the future Vicari hopes to make arrangements with local facilities that offer memory care and nursing care to bring the horses to the facilities and reach more patients. For now, she says, “I am humbled daily with God's abundant blessings allowing me the honor of serving others in such a unique way.”