

Sally Broder:

Helping Lives Through HorseSensing

BY BETTS COUP

Sally Broder knows firsthand how horses can help people who have experienced trauma, addiction, or other psychological and emotional problems. Her story—her own life saved by horses and their people—has shaped her career as a Jungian psychologist in private practice, inspiring her to help people find healing through horses and even develop careers within the horse industry. Sally has years of experience conducting equine therapeutic workshops with veterans, people in recovery and at-risk youth in her community in California. Her revolutionary program, HorseSensing, gives participants the chance to develop skills as grooms and hopefully discover a lifelong love of horses and a fruitful career along the way.

SAVED BY HORSES

Horses entered Sally's life for the first time directly following the death of her brother when she was just 13 years of age. Her first horse, given to her by her mother, brought her solace during this difficult time. "I didn't know it then, but horses in Greek mythology are thought of as transition animals. They take you through the land of the dead, through hard times and grief," Sally says.

Despite the comfort of her equine companion, life at home continued to have challenges. "My brother's passing blew our family apart," Sally recalls. Two years later, she answered an ad for barn help



Photo by Britni Olsen-Kovalenko

Sally Broder and Blindsided ▲



▲ Sally Broder with a group of veterans looking for the horse's heartbeat



▲ Sally Broder with RWCC CH Warrick Warrior in 1989

in the Pennysaver newspaper, seeking more time around horses. "I can literally remember walking into the barn. It was very quiet, it seemed like no one was there. There was a guy lunging this gorgeous horse," she says. The man was Frank "Poncho" Kibbee, and the horse he was working was a young gelding in the family of the great WGC Man On The Town. "He was light chestnut with a flaxen mane and tail, and he was just gorgeous," she says.

Poncho told her that the Western trainer who had placed the ad was away judging a show, but he himself needed some help. "I went to work for him, and that was the first Saddlebred I saw," Sally remembers. She fell in love with the breed and with being at the barn. Poncho taught her everything from the ground up. "I remember him pulling out trunks full of tack green with mold, and he'd show me how to use saddle soap and neatsfoot oil," she recalls. He gave her the skills she needed, both as a groom and working horses.

Meanwhile, Sally struggled with her grief over the loss of her brother and the challenges of her home life. "I had started using substances after my brother died, but I was going to the barn, too. In high school, I would go to the party one night, and then the next day I came to the barn. The horses mediated things; they kept me from going completely off the rails," she explains. "I'd come to the barn, and Poncho would ask me if I was ok, and having that meant I didn't want to be completely self-destructive." Poncho once discovered her crying as she groomed a horse and simply told her, "Sally, go ahead and let down on the horses. They can take it." She found that to be true then and again later in life.

In 1980, when she was 17, Poncho thought Sally was ready for her next role in the horse business and sent her to work for Sonny and Barbara Cannon at Menlo Circus Club as a groom. She accompanied them to shows and got a taste of what working with the top-of-the-line American Saddlebreds was like. She stayed a year before moving to San Francisco to attend college. Unfortunately, that was when Sally's grief and pain took over. "I got deep into drugs, to the point where I dropped out of school. When I was away from the horses, I really kind of dove into drugs because of the grief," she explains. "When I was around the horses, they were the thing I wanted to live for. When I left, I fell completely face-first into it." She hit her rock bottom at age 26. "I had about six super bad years there, but at 26 I got sober, and I literally haven't had [any substance] in 31 years," she says.

By 1988, Sally was spending her time attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and working a job she hated answering phones for a trucking company. "A friend at one of the meetings asked me why I wasn't doing what I loved," she recalls. She looked at her friend inquiringly, and they asked more directly, "Why don't you go and work with horses?" That very day, Sally called the one horse person she knew was still in California and would remember her, Anne Speck. Anne recommended she contact Bill Field, who had just

moved out from Colorado, to see if he might need help, so Sally showed up at his door, magenta hair and all, and walked right in to ask if she could have a job grooming for him. Though later he would admit he didn't really need help at the time, Sally was so enthusiastic about being in a barn, he hired her anyway.

Bill's business was thriving; it was the golden era of California Saddlebreds, and Sally attended all the West Coast shows and the World's Championship Horse Show. Bill and his wife, Chris, their son, John, and John's wife, Tara, all became like family to Sally. "They became super central in my life," she recalls. They supported her during those critical first years of sobriety and gave her the chance to develop confidence. "It's like Bill saw something in me that I didn't have the self-esteem to see in myself," she says. "I credit that time in my life for allowing me to stay sober and allowing me to do what I've done since then. I credit Bill and Chris for that, and how encouraging, loving and caring they were."

Within a few months, Bill offered Sally the role of stable manager, and she saw her own name on the logo when they ran ads in the magazines. She got to work some horses, too, including RWCC CH Warrick Warrior, a grand five-gaited gelding started by Tom Moore, and CH Kiwi, among many others. When Bill moved to Oregon after about four years, Sally went with him, but missed California and returned to work for Bill and Nancy Becker for a time.

Eventually, Sally started to feel like she was ready for her next step. Again, it was a suggestion from a friend in recovery that led her to think about going back to school. First, she enrolled in a drug and alcohol certification program at National University in San Diego. She then enrolled in the bachelor's program at the same school, and it was there she started to learn about the underlying psychological basis for addiction and the impact of trauma. "One of my teachers in college told me I'd found my lane. It was a passion for me," Sally recalls.

The same professor suggested she take the next step into graduate school, and Sally was accepted into the California Institute of Integral Studies, where she completed her master's and doctorate. She became intrigued by the work of renowned psychoanalyst Carl Jung and completed a two-year internship at the Jung Institute in San Francisco as well. After that, she immediately entered private practice.

INTRODUCING HORSESENSING

More than 20 years later, Sally continues to see clients in California, as well as a few in her second—and soon to be more full-time—home in Kentucky. However, her growing interest in equine-facilitated psychotherapy nudged her to pursue a new direction. Over the past decade, she has trained in equine-assisted personal development, or EAPD, and studied equine body language and behavior to learn more about how horses can help humans heal. "I knew when I would go into the barn crying and grieving, working on a horse, that horse would absorb my emotions. That pain would go into the horse and the horse would metabolize it, and I would feel better," she explains.

Sally was also working with the Coming Home Project, a consortium of therapists who did pro bono work with veterans. She felt the work she



Supporters of HorseSensing: John and Aidan Field, Jim Broder, Bill Field, Rena Elswick, Billy Bob Taylor, Connal, Tara and Brock Field, David Broder, Phillip Crittendon, and Sally Broder ▲



A group of veterans with one of the therapy horses and HorseSensing's yoga instructor ▲



▲ *Sally Broder and Blindsided*

was doing with horses could combine beautifully with what she was doing to help veterans. An opportunity arose when she was approached by Presidio Riding Club in Sausalito, California, and HorseSensing was born. The stable is located on former military land at Fort Barry, and part of their mission is to continue to serve members of the military and veterans. Sally has been bringing groups of veterans there to experience equine-facilitated psychotherapy since 2010. "The generous PRC members have donated the use of their horses, have brought the food and drinks, and have provided a safe and warm space to hold our events," Sally states. "We never had to fundraise."

At the same time that HorseSensing was taking wing, Sally was returning to the Saddlebred world. She and her husband, David, bred their Seaforth's Billion Heir son, Realize, who was foaled in 2010, and in 2012 they bought Blindsided for Sally to show. Her return put her in contact with Phillip Crittendon, a groom who started his career working with Charles and

Helen Crabtree and established a reputation as one of the best in the business. He inspired the idea for HorseSensing's Horse Caretaker Program. "I thought we could start HorseSensing in Kentucky. Instead of doing groups four times a year, we could dedicate a barn to it, and we could train people to work in the horse industry," Sally explains. "Instead of changing their lives for a day, we could change them forever."

Phillip agreed to lend his talents to the venture, serving as the Education Director for the American Saddlebred and Hackney Pony Show Horse Industry. "Phillip is the perfect person for this," says Sally. "You'd have to meet him to know why, but he's an excellent groom, caretaker and horseman. He'd be able to teach people of all backgrounds."

The plan is for the new HorseSensing program to launch in the spring of 2020 in Bagdad, Kentucky. Phillip will be joined by an equally accomplished and qualified team. Billy Bob Taylor (of the famed Thoroughbred farm Taylor Made Farm) will serve as

Education Director for the Thoroughbred and Harness Racing Industry. Dr. C. Reid MacLellan, who developed the Groom Elite certification program already utilized in the racing industry, is also on board as the Education Consultant for the Groom Elite Program. Participants in the program will receive extensive training in the respective industries using a tailored curriculum based on Dr. Mac's approach. Sally, of course, is the Executive Director and will also provide emotional and psychological support, and David Broder serves as the group's Addiction Treatment Specialist. The Board of Directors includes both of the Broders, as well as Bill Field, veterinarian Laura Strong, treasurer David Strong and Michelle Ganci, who is a professor of animal science at Fresno State. There is also their grant writer, Edie Wootton, and Development Director Rena Elswick, a former commissioner in the harness racing industry and lifelong horsewoman; both will work to fundraise



Equine therapist Marida Berlin, PATH, and Sally Broder ▲

for the organization. Royalee Cleveland, a longtime Saddlebred owner and exhibitor, is using her many years of experience working with horse shows to benefit charities to serve as the organization's Development Associate. The newest member of the team is Sarah Strong, who is serving as Social Media Director. "We're so lucky to have such an amazing team in place. We're all volunteers for the time being," Sally states.

These individuals are just as passionate as Sally. "I became involved with HorseSensing through my personal relationship with Sally," explains Laura Strong. "Our mutual fondness for horses and deep belief in the importance of mental health/self-care has led us to work together on a couple different initiatives." Laura is a veterinarian, a profession that has a higher rate of suicide, and she has worked with Sally in the past to provide support services and resiliency training to people involved in the field. "I was honored when Sally asked me to serve on the board of HorseSensing," she adds. "We hope that the mission of providing an

educational platform for those wishing to care for the horse and themselves is a win for all involved."

FILLING A NEED

In order to be prepared, Sally and David are readying to make Kentucky their primary residence, and they are regularly traveling to Kentucky to raise awareness of the program for stakeholders on all sides. One of the most important details about the new program is the need for training barns to be willing to accept people from the program. Thankfully, the feedback they have received has been overwhelmingly positive. "David and I visited as many barns as we could from Louisville to Lexington, distributing flyers and information, and we got to virtually every barn," she explains. "We told the trainers we would like to be able to send you people; we'd like you to agree to take interns from us. We told them they would already have beginning training. We'll have taken them to some horse shows, and they'll have

worked with us at the farm. Then we place them with trainers for a month, and the trainers can teach them their way of doing things. They don't have to pay them, just make sure they get tipped at a show like anyone else."

They also asked the farms they visited if they'd be willing to provide free clinics in their specialization. "We asked for their buy-in with this, and they were all about it," Sally says of the trainers they spoke to. "Keeping help is one of the biggest challenges facing our sport, more than it has ever been." The program seeks to provide part of the solution to that problem, and Sally is happy to help the sport she loves through her work with people in need.

The program is a unique opportunity for people to find healing and at the same time develop skills for a new career. "What we're doing will be different than any other equine program. We're certifying people on how to be grooms



▲ The crew at a May 2019 vet day at Presidio Riding Club

in the horse industry," Sally explains, as the program will include the chance for participants to be Groom Elite certified. There is a text to guide trainees, tests and certification levels, and the whole course takes approximately 36 weeks to complete, with 40 hours of classroom instruction and 80 hours of practical training. The Groom Elite program allows for progressive advancement in knowledge, leading up to level five, which includes working and riding horses.

Participants will each have one horse to care for, and they'll also have the opportunity to work small, local horse shows on the County Fair circuit. They are building a barn that will be dedicated to HorseSensing. Half the horses in the program will be retirees, and Sally is actively seeking additional retirees to board at the farm and be part of the program. The other horses will be some owned by the Broders, as well as rescue horses from Misfit Toys Rescue. The program is open to donated horses, too—those who aren't necessarily bound for the show ring but have plenty to teach

people and a long future ahead of them. Sally's hope is to acquire a group of younger horses that would be another learning avenue for participants. "For someone more advanced, we could teach them how to work with young horses, how to break them under saddle," she says. "People can go as far as they'd like to go," she continues. "It's not a training education program, but we'll teach people how to work with horses from the ground, and I'd like, at the same time, to give some people in the program the chance to get up on horses and ride on horses they can learn on. We might have some riding clinics. But that would all be something they would earn, once they're ready. That would just be the next skillset to learn."

Of course, an important part of HorseSensing will be the emotional support element, which Sally and David will run. "We aren't a treatment program; this will be a relapse prevention program," she clarifies. "We'll have group sessions. We'll be aware of each participant's experiences and be able to provide them with support

through twelve-step meetings, meditation classes, yoga classes, process groups, mindfulness trainings and that kind of thing. Participants will be able to have all of that and still be able to get all the horse education they need to have an ongoing career in the business."

However, for those not seeking a career in the horse business, the eventual goal is to incorporate an equine therapy program as well, once the groom training program is established. "Not everybody wants to work in this industry, and we want to offer them the experience of being with horses as well," says Sally.

The other important task has been finding organizations through which they can reach participants. "Our participants will be veterans, people in recovery from substance abuse, non-violent reentry folks and at-risk youth. We are grateful to the UPHA for supporting our efforts by spreading the word about what we will



▲ A veteran finding a healing relationship with a horse at Presidio Riding Club



▲ Sally Broder and CH Kiwi during her time at Bill Field's

be doing," Sally explains. She's met with people from probation and parole in Shelby County, with representatives of Veterans, Mental Health and Drug Court, as well as Goodwill Industries in Louisville, and the Commissioner of the Kentucky Department of Veterans Affairs to get connected to various groups like Awake Ministries in Shelbyville and the Kentucky Veterans Club. "In each place, we're trying to let them know what we're going to be doing and figure out a stream of people they can send this. We're also trying to figure out if there's any way to get any of this funded," she explains.

"We're aiming to teach people how to work with horses and stay clean and sober, to have a permanent career path," she continues. "When you get down to it, Shelby County is a small world. We're meeting with people who have similar goals to help vets and help people who are in recovery from addiction and looking for acceptance and to get the word out to both possible participants and barns."

THE HEALING POWER OF HORSES

Sally's personal experience with trauma and addiction gave her a unique perspective and eventually drove her to become a psychologist. "A lot of people will treat addiction without knowing what it's really like. It's hard to get inside someone's head when you haven't experienced anything like what they've gone through; I have a firsthand point of view," she explains. "It's also informed me that there's usually factors underlying the addiction that contribute to the self-destructive behavior. Those are often things people can't see themselves and don't talk about, don't address, but they're there." Throughout her own healing, horses were central, and they remain an important force for good in her life, and that has been the foundation of much of her present work. "I knew as a young girl the healing power of horses to help me endure the grief in my family, and the horses were healing for me again. I know how I was able to transform my life, to stay clean and sober through horses. That's the driving force behind HorseSensing."

Though it's a great deal of work, what Sally is doing with HorseSensing is truly remarkable. It is the kind of program that could effect change in both big and small ways, changing people's lives and perhaps altering some problems facing the horse industry at the same time. Horses are deeply good for the soul, and Sally has been and is continuing to develop programs to give a broad swath of people the chance to experience the power of these animals. Her own life was saved by horses—and by the people who love them—and she is developing ways for many others to experience that same life-changing magic and deep connection. She says of her relationship with her own horse, "We're not perfect every time, but he knows what I want and he trusts me. It feels like a partnership. It's like a dance. When you're with your horses, it's OK to be present."