

## **Students' Journey of Connection, Spirituality, and Healing**

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TRAVERSE CITY - At a time when stress, anxiety, and depression are high for students, an instructor takes her class to a local ranch for “healing.”

On April 25, 2024, the Writers Studio students at Northwest Ed Career Tech had the pleasure of visiting Reining Liberty Ranch, a local equine therapy organization dedicated to helping veterans and their families through animals. Teresa Scollon, the instructor for the Writers Studio program, set up this field trip for her students and invited the Graphic Arts and Health Sciences courses to join them.

For many, this farm is seen as a sanctuary and a place of healing. So, Scollon figured her students would benefit from a visit to this ranch.

“Students carry a lot of worry and stress,” says Scollon. “Many students have diagnoses of anxiety or depression, but all students experience stress. I think it’s important to show students that being outdoors, being around nature or animals, can be a source of healing.”

The visit included some time spent with animals on the farm, such as goats, horses, and chickens. They spent time with Adam, Becki Bigelow and additional staff, learning how to connect with these animals and with the natural amenities around them.

When asked how Writers Studio students could directly benefit education-wise, Scollon stated “Writers are omnivores, we are interested in everything. The more broad an experience base we can offer students, the better it is for their development as people and as writers.”

The students were split up into three groups; some went on a nature walk with Adam; some went with Bigelow to talk about her experience with her dad, her upbringing, and what brought her to the farm; and others spent time grooming horses and learning about their therapeutic training.

Adam first brought his group to see the goats. He stated that most of the goats were rescues and they immediately caught the students' attention as they playfully climbed on all objects in sight and sunbathed. They were very friendly, coming right up to the students for attention. One of the goats was particularly affectionate despite his size.

“He is a meat goat, but he won’t be butchered. We just can’t do that to him,” Adam said in reference to the Boer goat named Junior. Adam let everyone pet the goats and told the students to look at their hands. He explained that the goats have an oil residue on their fur leaving the students hands black.

Next, Adam took his group of students on a nature walk. Many students found it very relaxing and soothing. Adam taught them about native edible plants and Native American medicine wheels. Reagan Craker, at the time a second-year student from Suttons Bay, explained, “I liked being able to connect with the elements and hearing the natural sounds around me.”

Bigelow's group spent their time accompanied by many chickens and a peacock outside of her house on the ranch. "All the animals work together to make Reining Liberty Ranch an inviting and therapeutic place," Bigelow told all the students gathered around her. She told stories about how even the chickens had a role, and were often the greeting party for the families that visited.

The third group went to groom the horses with Pam and Tracey, the additional staff or volunteers at Reining Liberty Ranch.

Kaihe Brown, at the time a first-year student from Elk Rapids, claimed, "Until then I had no idea how someone could feel so connected to a horse, that was until I saw Scooter." Students found working with the horses extremely relaxing. The writers were given a demonstration of the training they do at Reining Liberty Ranch, and were then split into pairs to choose a horse to groom and interact with.

Next they were shown the Mastersons method. According to The Masterson Method Education, "By applying levels of pressure (touch) and movement to the horse's body in a way that the horse's nervous system is unable to brace against or guard- and reading changes in the horse's behavior as you do this – you enable the horse to tell you where it is holding tension..."

Students placed their hand on the horse side and applied light touch and watched for the horse's response.

Scollon said, “This kind of therapeutic touch is another form of communication. I wanted to give the students this opportunity to experience this as a form of relaxation and healing, but also just to broaden their sense of what is possible.”

This year's group of Writers Studio students plan to visit Reining Liberty Ranch again on May 8th, as Scollon has decided to make it an annual end-of-the-year trip for her students.