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Patti Payne: Raven Rock Ranch reaches youth through horses

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On Dec. 25, 2020, a 22-year-old man died due to an accidental drug overdose. Now as Christmas approaches, this time is excruciatingly difficult for the mother, a businesswoman and former Microsoftie who works in business development for an IT consulting company.

She has a daughter, 20, who starts at the University of Washington in January, and a 13-year-old son.

One of this woman's touchpoints for strength and healing is Raven Rock Ranch in Redmond, founded in 2011 by **Sandy** and **Tim Matts**.

"I wish I had discovered Raven Rock when my (deceased) son was younger, but by the time I became aware of it, he was too old for the program," she said.



COURTESY SANDY MATTS

Tim and Sandy Matts, founders of Raven Rock Ranch, a 10-year-old nonprofit providing equine-facilitated psychotherapy for troubled youth.

Now in its 10th year, the nonprofit's mission is to break the cycles of trauma, teen suicide, human trafficking and domestic violence through equine-facilitated psychotherapy for troubled youths 7-18 years of age, many traumatized from bullying, rape, a bad parent or feelings of isolation from the pandemic.

"Most don't trust people," Sandy said. "For survival, these children need to be able to close those terrible memories of trauma out. Oftentimes they won't or can't speak about what happened to them, but they will trust a horse."

She says horses are big and powerful, but are, by nature, kind and gentle.

"And horses need a leader to keep them safe. It is a perfect healing environment when mutual trust and respect is attained," she said. Raven Rock has 10 rescue horses.

"They were rescued as abused and abandoned. Every one needed to be rehomed," Sandy said. "Those horses have so much compassion. It manifests itself. They have lived through betrayal. Horses see right into your soul. They can read the electromagnetic field of the heart."

The Matts, along with their team of five trained facilitators, have helped hundreds of children since 2011 and often their siblings and parents as well. They currently have 30 children enrolled and a waiting list over a year long. "We have kids from every walk of life, every demographic. They're all hurting," Sandy said.

The Matts founded Raven Rock because they were both abused as children and had suffered trauma.

"We thought if we could just save one child from that feeling of isolation and that they're damaged goods, we would be successful. Now our save rate is 98%," she said.

One of the success stories is that 13-year-old boy, whose mother had wished she had heard about Raven Rock to help her oldest child who died on Christmas of last year.

That mom did reach out to Raven Rock for help for her youngest son who was about 10 years old at the time, struggling mightily

with emotional and behavioral issues.

“My son started attending and slowly developed a relationship with his horse and facilitator,” the mother said. “It has made a significant difference and had a profound impact on him.”

She said the sessions at Raven Rock helped with the boy’s emotional regulation which in turn helped with his relationships with friends, with kids at school and at home.

“He learned, along with his horse, what would happen. If he would get upset, angry or irritated, he could see how it impacted his horse, which really was his therapist.

He learned if he would calm himself down, his horse would calm down too. He built a relationship based on trust with his horse,” she said.

She believes that this three-year connection and growth experience for her young son, who has completed the program and felt ready to move on, has also now helped him cope with the death of his brother and some of the most challenging issues of a young teen’s life.

“I think he’s had love and patience and kindness modeled for him at Raven Rock. We have a large extended family but he’s had the professional support of his Raven Rock horse and family, and that’s meant everything because it reached him,” the mother said.

And as they do with all the young people who have completed their program, the Matts track the children’s grade point average as well as school attendance, positive changes in behaviors, and suicidal leanings.

“We have found that GPAs go from 1.7 to 3.6, attendance in school goes from 56% to 98%, negative behaviors are extinguished and suicidal ideation goes from 98% to 2% in one year. We have never lost one of our clients to suicide,” Sandy said.

The Matts have started a \$5 million capital campaign to get a larger horse facility.

“We want to expand the program, hire more facilitators, and we want to accommodate adults such as first responders and war

veterans who are traumatized. We know the need and feel we can help,” Sandy said.

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