

Raleigh woman brings healing to kids, horses

[Ret Boney](#) | June 15, 2010

Kim Tschirret



RALEIGH, N.C. -- Growing up in a family marred by alcoholism and verbal abuse, Kim Tschirret sought the unconditional acceptance she craved from other sources.

"I did not have God in my life at that point, so my horse was my comfort," she says.

In order to bring that same balm to children suffering from various kinds of emotional trauma, Tschirret launched [Hope Reins of Raleigh](#), a nonprofit that pairs kids with abused or neglected horses for mutual healing.

A faith-based nonprofit, Hope Reins is up and running in northwest Raleigh and will begin matching kids and horses this month.

The effort began when Tschirret, a marketing and business executive who left the workforce to become a stay-at-home mom, began exploring purchasing a horse about 18 months ago.

"Once I had my kids and found my faith, that was a big turning point for me," she says. "I was on the path to buy a horse, but that felt empty. It wasn't enough for me."

After reading a book about Crystal Peaks, a nonprofit in Oregon, Tschirret became excited about the organization's methodology and began talking with friends about starting a similar effort.

In spring 2009, she attended an Easter egg hunt on property owned by Bay Leaf Baptist Church, some of which was leased out to horse owners and some of which was vacant.

She shared her vision with leaders at the church, who then offered to house Tschirret's equine ministry for a nominal fee.

Since then, she has filed for and received 501c3 status, recruited a board of directors and a few dozen committed volunteers, adopted five horses and spruced up the leased property.

Knowing that Wake County already is home to a handful of therapeutic riding programs that serve children with disabilities, including Helping Horse and Horse and Buddy, Tschirret chose to focus on children facing emotional hardships.

That could include children in the foster-care or adoption system, or who have been physically, sexually or emotionally abused, lost a parent, been diagnosed with a difficult illness, or are at-risk in some way.

"We're not a lesson program and we're not therapists," says Tschirret, who is president of Hope Reins. "We want to come alongside therapy that's already happening and develop relationships."

The relationships they aim to develop are between child and horse, although a trained leader will facilitate each session.

"Many of these children have been harmed by adults," Tschirret says. "And horses mirror our emotions, so they make great therapy partners."

The adult leaders, all of whom go through background checks and extensive training, help the children perform a chore - weeding or mucking manure, for example - giving the adult an opportunity to see "where the child's heart is."

Reading whether the child is angry, sad or scared helps the leader decide whether to help the child work with a horse on the ground, ride a bit or just play games.

Each session will last 60 to 90 minutes, depending on the child's age, and a parent or guardian must be present at all times.

And while Tschirret feels prompted by her faith to pursue this project, conversion is not the objective, she says, and children and volunteers of all faiths are welcome.

"We are never going to shove our faith on these kids," she says. "It comes through in the way we're going to love and accept them."

But if the topics of God and faith bubble up, Hope Reins' volunteers won't shy away.

In fact, Tschirret named each of the organization's five horses after people in the Bible, hoping that might give her the opportunity to talk about strong figures from scripture.

It also provides the opportunity to talk about a horse's background.

Isaiah, for example, is an older horse that came to Hope Reins through an equine rescue organization but now is thriving.

"Isaiah was starved and abused, but he loves anyway," says Tschirret. "The kids can really relate to him."

With no paid staffers, Hope Reins is sustained by a group of about 25 dedicated volunteers who sign up to feed, water and exercise the horses, maintain the grounds, raise money, take photos, provide translation services, work with children or help out in a dozen other ways.

With that help, and the promise of another 400 people who have signed up to help, Tschirret estimates she can serve 10 children each week in the near term and already has received child referrals through a social worker who sits on the organization's governing board.

To date the organization has raised about \$46,000 in donations from individuals and foundations, and next year aims to raise \$70,000 to \$100,000, a portion of which will cover the cost of two staffers.

Feed for the horses is being donated, as are many of the veterinary services and supplies.

That financial and in-kind support means Hope Reins provides services free of charge, but Tschirret hopes parents who have the means to help out will make a donation to the nonprofit.

And while launching a nonprofit during a recession may be difficult, Tschirret is undeterred.

"We live in a tough world," she says. "It's tough for kids. There is no recession for God. And the recession is no excuse to not step out and do something. "