



# PARELLI GAMES

teach life lessons  
to troubled teens

**Clockwise from top left:**

*Gio and Otis cooling off after a long day playing games.*

*Charles, the "rock star," shows off his skills on the final night of the HorsePower for Youth program. Each boy was given the opportunity to do a freestyle demonstration using the Seven Games and obstacles.*

*Kevin and Henry showing off their Squeeze Game skills at the graduation.*



by **Deb Conrad**  
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**T**eenage boys stood in a line and shifted awkwardly as they read from cards they had written ahead of time. One boy summed up the others' feelings when he said, "We were labeled delinquents by the courts, but you made us feel like human beings."

Robbie Maus, a Level 2 student, fondly recalls this message of thanks she and others received on the final night of a pilot program called HorsePower for Youth. Maus, a volunteer and board member of a non-profit group called Horses for the Spirit, is part of a dedicated group bringing horses and people together to make a difference in the lives of others.

Horses for the Spirit utilizes the Level 1 games to teach its young and troubled participants skills they can use in life, for example, being a good leader, learning to have emotional control and finding ways to avoid conflict and encourage harmony.

"I chose to use Level 1 because it is an established system that is effective and allows for individual expression and creativity," Maus explains. "I learned so much about myself going through Level 1 with my mustang mare, Bella, and I had a vision about how the Parelli games could help others too. Horses were my saving grace when I was younger and I want to share that with others who don't have access to horses."

Maus explains that horses can change peoples' lives because they are "adept teachers who respond to humans in direct relation to how they are treated." Horses can offer immediate feedback about how behavior and attitude— even physical movements and posture— impact positively and negatively a person's ability to reach a desired goal with their equine partner. Horses may pin their ears, swish their tail or bolt if they are displeased. When a horse feels comfortable and safe, he may well follow his human leader at liberty.

During the HorsePower for Youth program, the boys were allowed to discover for themselves how to elicit a positive response from a horse using the Seven Games. The boys in the program learned the games, participated in simulations and watched herd dynamics to offer a well-rounded learning experience. As they progressed through the program, they began to see if they were antagonistic

or nagging, they might end up with a very uncooperative partner. When they learned to be assertive and at the same time friendly, the boys found that the horses would, for example, happily jump a small obstacle for them or trot in a circle around them until asked to stop.

Horses for the Spirit's philosophy is that through trial and error the boys will learn more than by being told exactly what to do. The boys are allowed to be creative and find their own ways within the Seven Games to play with the horses.

It is not a big leap to understand how learning to become aware of how one's behaviors and actions influence others, equine or otherwise, applies to every day life. Horses teach accountability.

The HorsePower for Youth program is designed to help youth make a connection between their actions and the end result of that action—a connection that can help them better function in society.

"Working with horses helps the kids see the good in themselves and gives

them hope for their future," says Melinda Blackwell, another volunteer and board member of Horses for the Spirit. Although the boys probably learn the most from the mistakes they make with the horses, the horses are forgiving and swiftly become friendly again when the boys make a

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RanDee showing Lee how to be 'friendly' with Henry.



**Clockwise from top left:**

Bob enjoys some time just quietly hanging out with his equine partner, Rosa. This was a big shift for "Cowboy Bob" who had a tendency to be a bit reactionary at the beginning of the program.

Santiago shares a tender moment with Bella after playing the Seven Games in the Northern Nevada desert.

Robbie Maus' nephew, with Bella, illustrating the connection that can develop between horse and human.



**"I learned to be a leader through my actions... Rather than getting involved in conflicts I would show leadership by the example of just moving forward with my life—through that leadership I saw positive changes."**

shift in their attitude and their approach. This is when the teens get to experience the constructive outcome of modifying their behavior.

Twice a week for ten weeks the boys have been making the trip from their residential treatment facility to the covered arena where they get to spend four hours with the "spirit ladies" (as the boys call the women of Horses for the Spirit) and their horses. On the final night of the program, the boys get to demonstrate their equine accomplishments for their families. All evening wide and bright smiles light up the faces of Maus, Blackwell and the other volunteers who run Horses for the Spirit. At the end of the night, the boys say their goodbyes and thank the volunteers for giving them this opportunity to learn new skills that can help them at home, in school and in the workplace...and for teaching them they are not just labels, but human beings after all.

Several months after the close of the pilot program, one of the boys from the program is participating in a demonstration for an audience interested in HorsePower for Youth. Maus unexpectedly asks him if he felt he benefited from the program. "I learned to be a leader through my actions," he responded. "Rather than getting involved in conflicts in the house (residential treatment facility), I would show leadership by the example of just moving forward with my life and through that leadership I saw positive changes." 🐾

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*Horses for the Spirit, located in Reno, Nevada, offers Equine Assisted Learning (under which HorsePower for Youth falls), Equine Assisted Coaching and Equine Assisted Psychotherapy. For more information visit [www.horsesforthespirit.org](http://www.horsesforthespirit.org)*