

High Ridge Harmony Farm is making equine therapy accessible to all - here's what they do

[Emilia Cardona](#) The Gardner News

Tucked away on Overlook Road, High Ridge Harmony Farm in Westminster has been a safe haven for many children since it opened in June 2022.

Harmony Farm specializes in equine therapy. Through interacting with the horses, participants of all ages have learned to understand themselves and to communicate with others.

Wife and husband duo Barbara and Karl Cudak always dreamed of opening a farm focusing on healing and teaching others about mindfulness and coping with their mental health. Barbara Cudak said Harmony Farm is a space for community youth to learn how to handle their social and emotional anxiety by discovering healthy outlets to cope with everyday stresses.

A long history of community involvement

The Cudak family has always been involved with community service in Westminster. Barbara Cudak said her husband's father, Robert Cudak, was the town's police chief for 32 years, and he had a passion for community-based policing. She said her father-in-law died in 2018, and they wanted to honor his service to the community, which inspired them to establish the farm in his memory.

Barbara Cudak has worked with community youth for over 25 years in Westminster. She has lived in Westminster for most of her life and spent many hours of her day working for various school councils, running many youth groups in town, and raising three kids of her own. Cudak said she and her husband focus on providing an advanced mental health resource for local families and youth between 10 and 22 years old.

"They learn to ask for help, read their own and others' body language to learn better communication," Cudak said. "After three to five weeks in the program, parents and the kids saw noticeable benefits. They can manage their anxiety."

What the farm offers

Harmony Farm has three horses: Coco, Emmy, and Olivia. The farm also has two certified therapy dogs, Sav and Bubby, and three miniature horses, Mint, Binx, and Mozey, who are also part of the equine therapy program.

Harmony Farm's healing and wellness program differs from the most common form of equine therapy that focuses on boosting people's confidence with physical and mental disabilities. Cudak said none of the program participants ride the horses, but instead, they focus on building a relationship with the animals through grooming, observation and educational activities.

"Combining equine therapy with mindfulness teaches better communication. Horses live in the present and use physical communication to interact," she said. "Kids learn by observing the horses; they learn to read body language and understand others."

Barbara Cudak said she started researching equine therapy certification in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. She said after two years, she and her animals got an equine therapy certification in 2022. Her dogs Sav and Bubby are also certified as therapy dogs.

She said tailored lesson plans guide participants through the three stations at the farm: the gratitude garden, peace park, and tranquil trail. The farm has 14 volunteers that range from the ages of 12 to 73 years old.

Volunteering at Harmony Farm does not require prior experience with farm animals or social work. Cudak said it happens that all of their volunteers currently work or are retired therapists, social workers, or have experience with trauma and mental health.

Each session has a maximum of nine participants, Cudak said, and each horse is assigned a group of no more than three, along with one or two volunteers to supervise each group.

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Partnership with Heywood Healthcare

This past summer, Heywood Healthcare School Based Services partnered with Harmony Farm to make this therapy service accessible to families with limited resources. Cudak said health insurance does not cover services like equine therapy, and all participants must pay out of pocket.

A 12-week program costs \$720, an eight-week program costs \$480, and a four-week program costs \$240. Cudak said many Greater Gardner families can't afford these programs even though they will benefit their children's lives.

Cudak connected with people who worked at the Heywood Healthcare School Based Services through the Women's Circle of Giving (WCOG). The leadership at WCOG invited Harmony Farm to be one of the local organizations they showcase at their quarterly meetings.

Cudak said Harmony Farm did not win the first-place donation money, but they still got the runner-up donation amount of \$1,900. With this money, Cudak said they were able to give current participants in the program a partial scholarship.

Since the partnership with Heywood, the farm has been able to offer a free five-week summer program to any child who will benefit from this advanced therapy but cannot afford it. The program also covers transportation costs; buses pick up the children and bring them to the farm.

The free program continues into the fall and winter as Heywood granted more funding to Harmony Farm. The fall program started in early September, and enrollment is on a rolling basis all through the week of Thanksgiving. Cudak said if they have the same number of participants as they do now, they could use the grant money longer and provide sessions throughout the winter months.

In the next year or so, Cudak said she wants to continue to fundraise for more scholarships so more people of all ages can benefit from equine therapy.

"Some of these kids carry the weight of the world. They carry a lot of weight in their hearts," she said. "For many kids, the holidays are triggering, so we want to stay open for the winter."

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