



## DCF COVID-19 Daily Update Supporting Children, Families and Staff June 17, 2020

### THERAPY BY DAN THE HORSE

When a girl or boy learns to trust an 1,100 pound horse, the experience is therapeutic.

Barbara Riley, a paralegal in the Department of Children and Families Meriden office since 2005, has a 36-year-old horse named Dan who has won the hearts of a number of children and youth over the years. Some of the children were involved with the Department and some were not.

But the magic is the same.

Ms. Riley bought Dan from his owner when she and her husband were taking riding lessons at a barn on Plantsville in 1996. Dan impressed them with being so gentle. "Dan is so easy going," she said. "He has a great disposition that makes him perfect with kids," she said.



In 2002, after they moved Dan to a barn in Walcott, Dan participated in a horse therapy program called "City Slickers." The 10-week summer program offered kids from both the inner city and suburbs an opportunity to learn about horses, including riding lessons and classroom activities. At the end of the program, the kids competed in a horseback riding show and "drill team" event where their accomplishments were recognized.

"Dan was a favorite with those kids," Ms. Riley said.

That prompted her to realize that some of the children whose case records she was reading could benefit from an encounter of the horse kind.



"Often I would be reading a narrative, and it just flies off the page that this kid would benefit from coming out to the barn," she said. The first child she looked to connect with some "Dan therapy" was an 8-year-old boy. The boy's social worker agreed this would be a good experience, and the worker and the boy visited Ms. Riley and Dan at the horse barn. The boy walked with Dan from his paddock to the horse barn where he brushed the huge animal and then, using a mounting block, got on Dan and rode on his back.

"He was 10 feet tall in the saddle - it gave him a sense of confidence," Ms. Riley remembered. "He was very proud and comfortable." Afterwards, the social worker took the boy to a restaurant where the boy told the worker "it was the best day of his life."

*Continued from Previous Page*

Ms. Riley said the experience is powerful for a child because "it's a big animal, and the child establishes a relationship built on trust.

"Dan's one in a million," Ms. Riley said. "I can put anyone on him -- so he's perfect for this type of therapy."

Ms. Riley has moved Dan to a barn in Deep River since then and now new children are getting to know the blonde American quarter horse.

One is four-year-old Hazel, who goes to day care at a home next to the barn in Deep River. One day the neighbor brought Hazel over, and the sparks started to fly.

"She just loves Dan," Ms. Riley said. "Hazel has a little brother and she sings to him. She makes up the words and often Dan is part of the song." Hazel will sometimes bring Dan a banana for a snack.

A few years ago, Ms. Riley came upon the case record of an adolescent girl who was very troubled. Ms. Riley got that hunch again. After talking with the social worker, the teenager was brought to the barn and things clicked. Before anyone knew it, the girl was brushing Dan as he was feeding.

What's Dan's secret?

"Dan is not judging her, " Ms. Riley said. "He is not evaluating her, and it's not a white-walled room. She was just enjoying being with him."

Later, Ms. Riley recalled, the social worker said "that's the happiest she's ever seen this girl."

Ms. Riley added that, "Kids establish a connection with Dan. We are all stressed about a bunch of things, and Dan just makes it all better."