

Love Thy Neighbor
By Helen T. Hertz

It's an inevitable conflict. As the lines between suburbia and countryside continue to blur and subdivision dwellers encounter the sights, smells and sounds of rural life, lifestyles collide and questions of how to treat both sides fairly arise. There are no easy answers, but one important point to consider, as county councils all over the country debate these issues, is the great benefit equine centers in particular provide their communities.

As anyone who's fortunate enough to own or know an equine knows, time spent with these animals is one of the best antidotes to the stresses of modern living. For young people especially, the therapeutic benefit of experience with equines is undeniable. And on matters of character development? Work with horses, mules and donkeys builds:

- Responsibility
- Compassion
- Cooperation
- Patience and
- Trust

Not a bad list!

Responsible boarding and training facilities, therapeutic riding centers and other equine-related establishments are part of our national landscape, literally and figuratively. The suburban resident whose four-bed/four-bath house abuts a horse farm or mule ranch might not enjoy the animals' early-morning vocalizations or the pungent waft of manure, but certainly he or she could appreciate the value of a young person learning to be a better communicator, a diligent worker, a dutiful caretaker for another being. This is something to consider during discussions of ways to regulate these businesses, potentially constraining them to the point they can't sustain themselves.

Trainer, author and advocate Meredith Hodges, whose Loveland, Colorado-based Lucky Three Ranch is located only a short distance from a vibrant sub-urban community, was recently involved in such a discussion in her county. Meredith knows the immeasurable value of the time she's spent with her equines, and through her support of Hearts & Horses, Northern Colorado's renowned therapeutic riding center, she's developed a profound appreciation for their work and the work of other facilities like them.

"These businesses and organizations don't have big budgets," she says. "They provide an incredibly valuable service to the community, and we should be very careful not to put them under undue strain simply for our own convenience."

Growth will continue because more people require more real estate and resources, but perhaps, just as developers are increasingly called on to give wetlands and natural habitat areas a wide berth, they should also give "equine habitat" the same consideration. Developers who bulldoze the countryside without a true understanding of the nature of the land do a disservice not only to rural inhabitants but also to the very consumers they serve. Sure, developers know their job, but equine people know their land. They know that you don't build next to ponds and reservoirs unless you want an annual invasion of

mosquitoes. They know that weeds don't distinguish between one property and another and, if not managed, easily jump the fence to infiltrate the neighbor's hay. They know about water, about waste, about food production—the list goes on. So, given all this, would it be unreasonable to suggest greater leniency in the regulation of equine business owners not only for what they do but also for the knowledge they possess?

As someone who's operated an equine training facility for more than three decades, Meredith's interest in education is paramount. Last year, she produced "Walk On: Exploring Therapeutic Riding" for her documentary series, *Those Magnificent Mules*. The program drew great response from therapeutic riding program operators and participants thanking her for shining a light on these organizations. Meredith also offers tours of her own ranch to help educate a public that might not be familiar with ranch life. Visitors who come to meet her animals and tour the grounds invariably gain a new perspective on equine training and the facilities where it's done. Perhaps if we could do more of that—highlight the benefits of these facilities to our communities—that sound of a donkey's bray coming through the window bright and early in the morning might make the neighbors smile.

For more information about Meredith Hodges and her programs including "Walk On" and the Magnificent Mules series, please visit www.luckythreeranch.com or call 800-816-7566.

If you're travelling through Colorado this summer, plan to tour Lucky Three Ranch in Loveland. For information and to book a tour, please visit www.luckythreeranch.com or call 800-816-7566.