

Season 4 | Episode # 20

How God Uses Horses to Heal: The Power of Equine Therapy

Jodi Stuber

Crystal Keating:

I'm Crystal Keating and you're listening to the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast. Each week we're bringing you encouraging conversations about finding hope through hardship... and sharing practical ways that you can include people with disability in your church and community.

Jodi Stuber co-founder and program director of HopeWell Ranch and the co-author of *Project Solomon* is joining us to share how her amazing organization uses rescued horses to reach out to children and people who live with emotional, spiritual, physical, and social needs. Together Jodi and her husband, Ty have helped hundreds of children with special needs and veterans living with PTSD, through their compassionate and creative approach to physical and emotional therapy.

I am so excited for our conversation. Welcome.

Jodi Stuber:

Thank you so much. I'm excited as well.

Crystal Keating:

I'm glad we got connected. So, let's start this conversation by talking a little bit about HopeWell Ranch. What is it? And when did you begin rescuing horses?

Jodi Stuber:

Well, HopeWell Ranch is a therapy farm. We work with people who are experiencing different challenges, a lot of trauma, some kids or adults who might be experiencing situations like divorce or death or any kind of challenges that would produce anxiety, depression.

We work with veterans. And we are a nonprofit, so we created this organization with the intent of being able to help as many people as possible. And horses just seem like a natural fit. I've always loved horses. I've seen how they can help ground people and help make people feel better.

And it's a different approach, but it's really powerful, especially when you invite the Holy Spirit to join you.

Crystal Keating:

Amen.

So, let's talk a little bit about rescuing horses, who are the horses? And I know we'll talk a little bit more about the kinds of benefits that they themselves bring, but how did you begin rescuing horses? That's a big job.

Jodi Stuber:

All the horses that we have here on the farm have been donated. So, some of these horses have actually been rescued by other individuals. And then they've reached out to us to say, can they please come and live with you and serve the population of people you work with?

And it's been an exciting journey. One of our mental health practitioners, she's a horsewoman and she said, Jodi if you think about it, these horses are all rescued because they're not going to a kill pen. They're not in an undesirable situation. They're getting everything they need. And so, it's been a real blessing.

We have currently 18 equine, but we get offers of horses all the time.

Crystal Keating:

You're actually having to say no because the need is so great.

Jodi Stuber:

Yes. My heart is yes, let's take them all. We wouldn't have room for everybody, but we certainly wouldn't have resources to take care of everyone that we've been offered either.

The horses that we do have, we're so blessed to partner with because each personality helps a certain personality. And it's just beautiful. I love knowing that because God is our supplier, he's gonna take care of these horses because this is God's ministry. I'm just a steward.

Crystal Keating:

Amen. Wow. What trust! Well, Jodi, I was looking at your website and I was just captivated by your mission; create a loving environment of hope, healing, and purpose for children, individuals, and families where lives can be transformed in order to succeed through the redeeming love of Christ. So, how do you implement the love of Jesus in the programs you offer?

Jodi Stuber:

We as a staff, start every day in prayer, you know, lifting each other up, filling our cups with the word of God, praying for each other, worshiping so that we can then go and serve the beautiful people who are coming here. We don't discriminate of course, of who comes and partakes of our services. So, we have people from all different backgrounds. But we all know that everyone needs Jesus.

Crystal Keating:

Amen.

Jodi Stuber:

So, we just wanna be the hands and feet of Christ so that they can feel that belonging, that love, that joy, the kindness, simple kindness. That has probably been one of the sweetest compliments we've been getting consistently. You guys are so welcoming and so kind, and I love that our staff exudes that love to everyone who comes.

We are a judgment-free zone. We work with veterans, some who have moral injury issues, and we always tell them it doesn't matter what your past. We're not here to be your judge. We're here to love you, accept you, and hold space.

Crystal Keating:

So, when children and their families and other adults who may be struggling with PTSD, or you talked about moral injury or grief, when they enter your program, do they communicate to you the kind of hope and healing they're looking for? Do they know what they need when they come to your ranch?

Jodi Stuber:

Oftentimes the answer would be no. If you were to sit down in traditional therapy and I'm not opposed to traditional therapy, so please don't get that impression. But if you have someone you know, you sit down with them and you say, well, what's happening in your life?

And they look at you and they shrug their shoulders. You know, they're not willing to talk. There's not a relationship there. They don't know if they can trust you. They have all of these barriers that they have built up over the years. So, they don't know who they can trust.

Maybe they've been told from a very young age if you say anything, somebody's gonna die. And so, when you have a person, even as an adult, those memories haunt them. So, they may not know when they come here, what's going to happen. But because it's an experience, they get to actively participate in their healing.

And I love this model. It's EAGALA and it's Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association. And that model allows each person, we believe that the solution is within their hearts. Here at HopeWell Ranch, we believe it's the Holy Spirit partnering with our horses to bring that to the forefront.

So maybe someone is dealing with a bully issue and then we invite the individual to go spend time with our horses and see, well, how do the horses handle bully issues? And then they can watch that happen. And then maybe that horse will give them some ideas or some solutions and they themselves will feel like an aha moment where they will go....

Well, I never would've thought of that if I hadn't seen it before my eyes. And it's just a beautiful thing to watch that happen. And it's so much more likely to stay with us if it comes from within us.

Crystal Keating:

Therapy isn't happening to them. Hope and healing is happening with them by observing. Talk a little bit about horses. I mean, they are herd animals, and they have, there's like a hierarchy. So, talk about even like horses get bullied. I mean, I've seen it. But what have you seen with the horses?

Jodi Stuber:

Okay. So, horses are prey animals. Any animal with its eyes on the sides of its head is a prey animal. Predators are the eyes on the front of the face.

So, humans are predators. Horses are prey. Prey animals are constantly vigilant about who or what might hurt them. So, the horses, they're very in tune. They can feel your heartbeat four feet away. When they say a horse will know if you're nervous, they will know if you're nervous. But what's beautiful about the horses is that they are so in tune with the environment, with you, with each other, that they get to build trust with you or not, depending on what that situation is.

And they do have a hierarchy. Every day they're jostling to see who's boss and they do that by, can I make you move your feet? If I can make you move your feet, I've won. That means I get to be boss over you. So, I have horses that have tried to do that with me. You know, they'll be released into the pasture and instead of walking away from me, they might turn and try to walk into me and it's like no, no, this isn't gonna work today. But then we'll have....

Crystal Keating:

I'm still in charge today for your good.

Jodi Stuber:

Yes. And so, when the children get to see how the horses maneuver each other, that also gives us good information as to where a child is at.

You know, we always tell children and adults, please don't stand directly in front of a horse or directly behind because they cannot see you there. Their vision will not pick you up. And what happens is if we see a child consistently put themselves directly in front or directly behind, we know that this is a child that probably puts themselves in danger on a regular basis and may not even be aware.

Crystal Keating:

Wow. So, you're learning a lot about the people who are coming.

Jodi Stuber:

Yes.

Crystal Keating:

And how they relate to the horses.

Jodi Stuber:

Yes. And then that helps give us information on how we might be able to help them better. And so, a lot of times when the families come or children come, we invite them to create a safe space within the arena.

And then they can either use that safe space to keep the horses out, depending on what that horse is in their life, or invite the horse in. So, like maybe the horse is something negative in their life. Maybe that horse is a family member that they don't trust anymore, and they need to keep that horse out.

Or maybe that horse is somebody beloved to them that they're like, if I have my grandma with me, I know I'll be safe. And so, then they create that space that is big enough to allow the horse to be a part of it.

Crystal Keating:

Oh, that is fascinating. Wow.

Jodi Stuber:

I have the best job. I truly do.

Crystal Keating:

You do. You do and I bet you've met some completely memorable people. So, do you have a notable story of a veteran with PTSD or a child with severe trauma issues who've experienced tremendous healing through equine therapy?

Jodi Stuber:

I sure do. One day I was out in the field, and I was working and the horses, they're doing their thing and I was doing my thing. And somebody pulled in, in a truck and he got out of the truck. And so, I went to meet him, and I shook his hand and I said, I was grateful he was here. And he said, I know you really don't know me, but I wanna thank you. And I said, okay, for what? And he said the very fact that I'm here, shaking your hand and I'm present in this moment is because of the services you provide here at the ranch.

He said, "I was suicidal and then I came here." And he says, "I don't wanna die anymore because I've been shown something more."

Crystal Keating:

Incredible. Amen.

Jodi Stuber:

When God does things like that, I just sit back and I cry, not out of pain or anger or loss, but I'm so grateful. I am so, so grateful that we were here and able to hold that space.

And he had had a veteran friend who invited him here during a crisis time and he spent time with our horses and that other veteran in the field. And he'd left the field feeling so much better.

Crystal Keating:
Wow. It's like the things the enemy has stolen.

Jodi Stuber:
Yeah.

Crystal Keating:
God is renewing and providing through HopeWell Ranch. Incredible. That's awesome.

Jodi Stuber:
It's truly amazing to see how the Lord partners with these beautiful animals. I have so many stories about children. I'm gonna share this, this story. Now, Bubba Jack was a donkey that we used to have. Sadly, we don't have him anymore cuz he passed away.

He was so cute. We had a veteran who would get out of his truck and go, "Hey, Bubba Jay, how are you?" And Bubba would come running. So, one day that veteran actually brought his granddaughter to the ranch, and she fell down right by the gate, and she started to cry, and Bubba came running over and he stood over her until she could get up and compose herself again and come away, you know? And it was just the most beautiful thing to see these animals have such a nurturing instinct.

Crystal Keating:
So protective. That's what I keep thinking about, how many people who've experienced trauma feel unsafe all the time. They are unsafe around people. They feel unsafe to themselves.

Jodi Stuber:
Yeah.

Crystal Keating:
And people can feel unsafe around horses, cuz they're so big and strong and unpredictable. But that's not what's happening here.

Something very different.

Jodi Stuber:
And just last week, we had a group of children. There were third graders. There was ten of them. They were very dysregulated. You know, they didn't wanna cooperate with listening to the story or doing the art craft or any of those things. But when we took them into the arena, Oliver is the biggest horse on the farm.

He's a Percheron Cross. He's a Canadian sport horse who's retired out of a very nice career. I think he has the best job because he gets loved on and he gets to give himself to all these beautiful people. So, he was in the arena and Emily was holding him, holding his lead rope.

And when the children that had been very dysregulated walked into the arena, they all got very, very quiet and very still, and coming up and spending time, touching him, brushing him, resting their hand on his side as he breathed. You could just see these children impacted in a profound way. It was truly beautiful.

Crystal Keating:
Sounds like they felt very calm and sort of in awe.

Jodi Stuber:
I think so and I think safe. You know, I feel like what you were sharing earlier, that was an opportunity where they got to experience the safety of these beautiful animals that are very good at their job. They know when to stand still. Of course, horses are horses. You know, they're gonna do things that are goofy. But I've seen horses that will be uncharacteristically calm and kind if the situation warrants it.

Crystal Keating:
Hmm. Oh, amazing. Well, Jodi, you're co-author of the book, *Project Solomon*. And in it, you wrote a really interesting quote. You said the way the horses see you is an imperfect reflection of the way God sees you. The God who made these beautiful animals and capable of seeing masks, is the same God who looks at you and sees you for who you are, his beloved child made in his image and loved beyond your ability to comprehend.

That is our God. So, what is it about horses that truly see us as we are?

Jodi Stuber:
They are so accepting of the truth. I'm gonna share another story. I had five veterans standing out in the field and each veteran had a horse buddy standing behind them. So, they were all connected by a halter and lead rope, and they were all going extremely deep with horrific stories, very heart-wrenching, heartbreaking stories of things that they had to deal with.

Things that they had to do, things that they saw. I have five veterans standing there and they're all crying, male and female. And all of a sudden, all five of my horses, God's horses laid down behind those veterans.

Crystal Keating:
No way!

Jodi Stuber:
All five. And I just felt like the horses were taking the burden of what they were releasing, and they were laying it down and they had their backs, and it was the most profound, beautiful moment. It's definitely one of them that I will never forget.

Crystal Keating:

Wow. I have rarely seen a horse lay down and to do that all together and to have those veterans see it as a group is so significant. It's the invisible God becoming visible through his creation, all of creation speaks of his goodness and his glory. Wow.

Jodi Stuber:

Yes. I love that.

Crystal Keating:

I'm just curious, what kind of interactions do you see between horses and children with disabilities or special needs?

Jodi Stuber:

We see such precious, precious reactions. Like I was sharing earlier, a horse might be kind of a goofball and really energetic. But then once they come into the presence of a child that might be in a wheelchair or might have a sight issue or really any challenge. I've seen our horses just become very relaxed, very out of character if you will. One of my favorite stories is we used to host a camp called Camp Quality. And these children would come from all over the state of Michigan, who either had cancer or had had cancer. And this particular day, this parent came up to me and she said, can my daughter ride? And of course, that was my whole intent for the morning.

We had lots of volunteers. We had lots of horses ready to go, and the mom looked at me and she said, it's her wish. And she goes, please, please make her wish happen. This child had cancer in her legs. So, she'd had a leg removed and she had heart problems.

So, she had a double whammy. And I looked at Victory, this beautiful, old horse that we had at the time, and I said, what do you think, Victory? Can we do this? And so, I looked at the mom and I said, let's do this. Mom and dad put this child up on the horse and I wish you could have seen.

It makes me emotional, her smile. It lit up the world. I mean, she was so happy, and to think all I was doing was providing a little girl, a horseback ride. But it meant everything to her. And mom and dad were crying. I was crying. And Victory was like, let's just walk.

Crystal Keating:

Oh, to bring such joy. I mean, to think about children going through so much in such a short amount of time that their little brains can't really process.

I mean, adults, we can't even process all of this, but to restore some kind of pleasure and joy and connection is so wonderful.

Jodi Stuber:

I'm not kidding. I honestly mean it. I feel like I have the best job because I get to watch God move and work in everyday things that really inspire the miraculous.

And I'm just excited to see what he's gonna do every day, because it's always different.

Crystal Keating:

So, you're always expectant, and you know, in your book *Project Solomon*, you talk about how your horse Solomon helped you through your grief. So how did God use this amazing creature to bring you such comfort?

Jodi Stuber:

Solomon was my heart horse, and horse people will know what that means. But heart horse means the horse that you'll remember forever. And he was so present with me during times that were just really tough. He'd come up to me and he'd stand near me, and he'd just know. He knew what I needed. You know, he'd come up to me sometimes and just wanna be with me.

And sometimes that would cause the tears to flow because it was almost like a permission. Jodi, I see you, you can be real with me, let it go. And it was such a beautiful relationship to have with him. And he truly did help me in my healing process.

Crystal Keating:

What a gift from the Lord. And we all need that comfort.

And I think about the last two and a half years that so many of us have experienced such isolation and grief in various places of our life after, you know, going through the pandemic and the shutdowns and staying at home. And I know everyone's experience has been different, but at least for me, and many of the people who write to Joni and Friends, we've all felt this sense of we need one another and the deep loneliness that we can experience is profound and the many implications of being isolated.

So, Jodi, as we finish our conversation here, I just feel like we could keep talking and talking. But what have you learned from horses that can teach us more about our need for deep bonds, especially our need for connection with other Christians and just living life together?

Jodi Stuber:

I love that question because horses are the epitome of community. They're herd animals, so they need each other to survive. In Genesis, God said it's not good for man to be alone. So, he wants us to be in community with each other. And he wants us to be that light and that life, that's hopefully gonna spark something good in somebody else so that they don't feel alone.

I'm an empath, so I feel other people's feelings. And when I see somebody who's lonely or hurting, it affects me. I innately want to reach out, but I really pray that other people who would want to reach out. You know, all it takes is a smile or a look, you know, seeing somebody face to face. Even with my staff, if they're having a really down day, I always ask them, would you please look me in the eye because I wanna speak life into you? I want you to know how important and valuable you are and how much this world needs you and how much God loves you.

And he created you for a purpose that only you can fulfill. So, I love that when I watch the horses, they look out for each other. They correct each other. They commune with each other; they eat with each other. They sleep in the same space. They're there for each other. But then they make room for us.

And I love that they've created havens of hope for all the people coming to this ranch to seek that hope, that purpose that God has for them, and that healing.

Crystal Keating:

Amen. Well said, Jodi. It's been such a pleasure speaking with you on the podcast today. Where is your book, *Project Solomon* available for purchase, if people wanna know more about your story and about HopeWell Ranch?

Jodi Stuber:

Tindale Publishers is who published *Project Solomon*. So, it's available through them and it's available at any booksellers. We've been really excited to see it of course on Amazon. But it's been seen at all different kinds of bookstores, including Target and Walmart. So, we're really excited. We're very hopeful that people will wanna pick it up.

Crystal Keating:

Awesome. Well, may God bless you Jodi, and your husband, and all that's happening at HopeWell Ranch. Thanks so much for joining me on the podcast today.

Jodi Stuber:

Thank you so, so much for having me. It's been a true joy. Thank you.

Crystal Keating:

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