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Young gangsters turn into horse whisperers

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MARSHALL — At home, he was a young initiate into gang life. In prison, he confronted staff with sharp words or sullen silence.

On a horse farm in Madison County, he is a 16-year-old philosopher.

Which horse is most like you? Shannon Knapp, Horse Sense of the Carolinas owner, wants to know. The boy says it's Cisco, always bucking and biting.

Which horse do you want to be like? she asks. That's one of a different color. He picks Captain, who trusted him as soon as they met.

The teen and another Swannanoa Valley Youth Development Center inmate graduated Tuesday from a therapy program having learned a little bit about horses and a lot about themselves.

The teens, whose identities the state keeps confidential, are the first whom Horse Sense has helped using state money awarded to the Buncombe County Gang Violence Prevention Project. As police and residents notice a surge in gang activity, a central focus of their prevention efforts is the youth prison, where many teens identify with gangs and where juveniles and employees have been assaulted.

The boy showed off what he had learned in the 15-week program Tuesday by walking Captain around a fenced field with gestures, rubbing and gentle nudges with an orange stick.

The teen may have learned the horses' personalities and won their trust, program manager Rob Jacoby said, but they frightened him when he first arrived.

He set one foot inside the stall where the majestic creatures live and was reluctant to go farther, even though he wouldn't admit to being afraid.

"That's what symbolized his whole life," said Jacoby, a former clinical supervisor at Swannanoa. "He's got one foot in being part of the gang, and one foot being partway out."

The transformation was achieved by working with animals that counselors said give feedback to every action. Because they're prey animals, horses are hard-wired to notice each movement, every concealed attitude.

At the farm Knapp and her husband, Richard, founded in 2003, a horse is not only a horse; it's a metaphor for life.

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