

Small Horse, *Big* Medicine

by Susan Edwards, New Jersey



It's not easy healing the heart of a child. It takes powerful medicine.

This story is about one of our most powerful healers—a miniature horse named Little Annie. I'm a psychologist who runs a non-mounted horse-therapy farm in New Jersey. Our horses treat children ages 5–12 who have experienced trauma. Traumatic loss makes children want to withdraw, pull back from love because the pain associated with loss is profound. To counter such loss, we bring in special magic—in this case, the loving heart of a miniature horse named Little Annie.

Annie is a beautiful little brown-and-white pinto with a lush long mane and tail. She is just 2½ feet tall and weighs about 250 pounds. Her long, brown bangs touch the top of her eyes and her tail sweeps along the ground. When she runs, she prances up and down and her long mane blows in the wind. She is a beauty to behold, but what makes her amazing is the power of her heart and the way she touches children who have lost someone they love.

When Peggy came to our horse-therapy farm at age 9, she was a sad little girl. Her best friend, Sally, had died in a car accident some months before, and her grandmother was very concerned about her. Peggy stopped eating, she lost interest in things she had previously enjoyed, and spent too much time crying. She and Sally had been together since preschool and were like sisters. They did everything together. They

played on the school soccer team, were in the same classes at school, and spent lots of time giggling. They were BFFs—best friends forever.

After Sally's death, Peggy stopped smiling and moped around the house. She started building an emotional wall around her heart that even her grandmother couldn't break through. "I'm taking you to horse therapy," Granny told her one day, and contacted me to see what we could do to help Peggy.

When they arrived at Journey's End Farm, we gave them a tour of the property and then went to the horse barn, a small, cozy building decorated by children who had visited the horses when their hearts were healing. There were drawings and cards on the stalls of each horse, as well as a Wall of Honor in the barn, just beyond the Memorial Garden at the entrance, displaying pictures of loved ones who had passed away. Peggy looked around, walked to the stall of each of our three horses, and came to a stop at Little Annie's. Little Annie's deep-brown eyes looked up at Peggy, who reached out to touch Annie's soft, smooth face. Without words, the two stood there for what seemed like a long time.

Granny brought Peggy back to the horse-therapy farm for nearly a year. The girl and the miniature horse did many things together during that time. They walked, talked, and played horse ball, and Peggy dressed Annie in

costumes and taught her to play the toy piano with her nose and the flat piano keyboard with her front feet. They also learned to dance. Under my guidance, Annie became an interactive friend who communicated heart-to-heart in ways only animals have mastered. It was my job to facilitate the grief process, integrating psychology.

As time went by, Peggy was able to talk with her grandmother about how much she missed Sally. Peggy made a book about her best friend with her own drawings that she read to Little Annie. Peggy drew a picture of Sally to place on the Wall of Honor and became more open to her grandmother's love. In time, she could again speak about her friend from a position of appreciation that Sally had been in her life. She understood that Sally would want her to be happy and that love stays with you forever.

All of these things Little Annie taught Peggy, with my help. When Peggy came for the last time, she hugged and hugged Annie and told her she would come back to visit. She thanked Annie for the special medicine that had healed her heart.

Susan Edwards, Ph.D., is a licensed psychologist who directs Team Velvet, Inc., a non-mounted horse-therapy program in Flemington, New Jersey. See TeamVelvet.com or write sedwardsnj@earthlink.net, as the group continues to look for a legacy permanent farm home and benefactors to help sustain their work with children.