

# The Helping Horse: How Equine Assisted Learning Contributes to the Wellbeing of First Nations Youth in Treatment for Volatile Substance Misuse

## Partnering to Understand



Elder Gladys Wapass Greyeyes and Ernie Sauve at the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding.

Our team devoted two years toward relationship development before we embarked on our study to better understand the role of Equine Assisted Learning (EAL) in the wellbeing of First Nations youth who misuse volatile substances. At the start of our project we worked together to develop a Memorandum of Understanding focussing on reciprocity to ensure that everyone involved in our project contributed to and benefited from their participation.

## Background

The White Buffalo Youth Inhalant Treatment Centre (WBYITC) is a six month residential treatment program for female First Nations youth located on the Sturgeon Lake First Nation in Saskatchewan. The Cartier Equine Learning Centre offers Equine Assisted Learning as “...an effective approach to human development through horsemanship”. The two have been partnering since 2005 to offer EAL to youth. In collaboration with university and community partners, our team came together to understand how youth experience wellbeing based on their participation in the EAL program. Our work is framed in a holistic understanding of health being a balance of mental, physical, social and spiritual wellbeing (Dell, Hopkins & Dell, 2005).



## Role of the EAL Horses, Facilitators and Learning Activities



“Being in the program helped with the girls’ self-esteem, when they realized they learned a new skill they would be smiling. Then they would let everyone know what skill they learned that day and that they succeeded.”  
-Staff interview, Intake 34, 2011

## Study overview

Our study brings together two fields of promising practice but in which there is limited documented research evidence: equine assisted learning (EAL) and residential treatment for youth volatile substance misuse (VSM). Our study is framed within the holistic bio-psycho-social-spiritual framework of healing applied by the White Buffalo Youth Inhalant Treatment Centre located at Sturgeon Lake First Nation in central Saskatchewan. The complementarity of this framework with the Cartier Equine Learning Centre’s EAL program addresses whether EAL contributes to the wellbeing of First Nations youth who misuse volatile substances; in theory it does. A case-study design was applied in our exploratory, community-based research project to specifically examine how EAL contributes to the youths’ wellbeing. We found that the unique context of the Cartier EAL program that includes the horses, facilitators and structured activities contributed to youths’ wellbeing in multiple ways and to various extents, with the horse as a central helper to all. Our findings are shared in traditional academic form through the identification of major themes and narratives, congruent with a case study research approach and which reflects a First Nations cultural approach to knowing.

## Sharing with Community What We Learn

### CALGARY

#### Study to examine the benefit of horse therapy with youth solvent abusers

By SUSAN SOWWAY  
Sweetgrass Writer  
SISIKKA FIRST NATION

Healing through “horse therapy” is a way in which a First Nation in southern Alberta is looking to help youth linked with solvent abuse. Sikiska First Nation recently opened a treatment centre for youth solvent abuse and is partnering with researchers from three universities and

committee to be part of the process and to get help with their programming, said Colleen Dell, associate professor at the University of Saskatchewan. Universities in Calgary and Regina are also involved. “It is important to know what we are doing and what is working so that we can replicate those things... if there is no standards then how do we know what is working for the

“As the person changes and, in that moment makes the right decision, their anxiety is released and the horse immediately responds positively,” said McKinnon. The White Buffalo Equine Learning Centre identify the needs of an individual, said McKinnon, allowing programs to be tailored to fit the First Nation community. The two-year research study

Alberta SweetGrass  
September 2010

Colleen Dell, Ernie Sauve, Gayle Cartier, Loni Longclaws & Janice Boucher presenting at the 2012 Saskatchewan Inhalant Conference



## Data Analysis

To ensure that voices of the youth who participated in the EAL program were central to the study, our approach is a combined case study format with thematic analysis. Research assistants representing White Buffalo, Cartier Equine Learning Centre and the universities were equally involved, alongside the lead researchers, in developing the case studies. Together with the full team, the data was shared and interpreted. Traditional ceremony ensured the incorporation of the horse throughout the research process.

## Key Findings

*“The horse respects me, he doesn’t really do anything to me but he helps me out at the time that I need help”*  
Youth interview, cohort 2, 2011

- The youth experienced physical wellbeing largely through physical touch and interacting with the horses;
- The youth experienced social wellbeing primarily through developing relationships; bettering their communication; having an important new experience; positive change in their behavior;
- The youth experienced mental/emotional wellbeing mostly through increased through increased self-identity; increased self-worth; improved ability to problem solve; more positive attitude;
- The youth experienced spiritual wellbeing mainly through just “being with” the horse and developing a bond; and
- The horse has cultural significance for some First Nations youth in the EAL program. The horse offered the WBYITC staff a tangible cultural connection for teaching the youth about who they are.

Based on the findings of this study, key policy and practice implications warrant attention, including recognizing that the horse and First Nations culture are historically linked, and that there is room for further understanding about this in the context of EAL.

## Further Information

Cartier Equine Learning Centre  
www.cartierequinelearningcentre.com  
White Buffalo Youth Inhalant Treatment Centre  
wbuffalo@sasktel.net

Dr. Colleen Anne Dell  
Colleen.Dell@usask.ca  
Darlene Chalmers  
Darlene.Chalmers@uregina.ca

Visit or webpage at: <http://tinyurl.com/horseashealer>

1. Chalmers, D. & Dell, C. (2011). Equine-assisted therapy as an adjunct to treatment for solvent abuse among First Nations youth: A key consideration for building an empirical knowledge base. *Native Studies Review*, 20(1), 59-87.
2. Dell, C., Chalmers, D., Dell, D., Sauve, E., & MacKinnon, T. (2008). Horse as healer: Examination of equine assisted learning in the healing of First Nations youth from solvent abuse. *Pimatisiwin: A Journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous Community Health*, 6(1), 81-106.
3. Dell, C., Chalmers, D., Bresette, N., Swain, S., Rankin, D. , & Hopkins, C. (2011). A healing space: The experiences of First Nations and Inuit youth with equine-assisted learning (EAL). *Child & Youth Care Forum*, 40(4), 319-336.
4. Dell, C., Hopkins, C., Dell, D. (2005). Resiliency and holistic inhalant abuse treatment. *Journal of Aboriginal Health*. 1(2), 4-12.
5. MacKinnon, T. (2007). At the heart of equine-assisted learning. Saskatchewan: M.E.S. Ltd.