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PICTURE: Anthony Brady

LIFE-CHANGING EXPERIENCE

Horses at Andrea Bell's (right) farm are helping Jaylee Neal (left) deal with a debilitating illness.

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weekender.

PASSION: Jaylee Neal loves her time at Andrea Bell's Naroghid equine and well-being centre, Just Horses. **Picture:** Anthony Brady



FOR THE LOVE OF THE HORSE

The calming, patient nature of the horses on Andrea Bell's Naroghid property is proving to be a life-changer for some south-west residents. Jenny McLaren finds out more.

JAYLEE Neal never knew what freedom felt like until River came into her life.

For most of her 27 years, Jaylee has lived within the constraints of physical disabilities that rob her of not only her mobility, but also at times, her spirit.

Suffering cerebral palsy and congenital cytomegalovirus, the young Camperdown woman also struggled with the emotional burdens of depression and anxiety.

Her mother, Kellie Neal, despaired for Jaylee's future.

That all changed nearly two years ago when Jaylee's path crossed with that of self-described horse lover Andrea Bell.

At Andrea's Naroghid equine and well-being centre, Just Horses, Jaylee made the life-changing acquaintance of a 15-year-old Welsh mountain pony called River.

Under Andrea's careful guidance, the

friendship between Jaylee and River developed into a bond of mutual love and respect. Andrea, 52, has always known the therapeutic effects engendered by the love of an animal. From a little girl desperate to have her own pony, to a trailblazing High Country jillaroo, animals, and particularly horses, have always been her "reason for getting out of bed".

"In my own life, animals have always been there to fill the spaces in difficult times, like when my Dad died and when my son left home," she says.

"Animals are non-judgemental. Interaction with animals can provide comfort, a sense of peace, purpose, companionship and love. Developing a bond can provide self-worth, self-esteem and trust."

Keen for others to share the same experiences, Andrea purchased her own 10-acre



GIDDY UP: Andrea Bell with client Jaylah.

haven just outside of her Camperdown home town in 2012, naming it Maragle Park after the Kosciusko National Park forest of

the same name where she spent much of her time as a jillaroo.

In 2018 she began offering riding lessons for mainly local kids, drawing on her experiences as a level one Riding for the Disabled coach, pony club coach and Gestalt equine practitioner, a method of working through issues by building a trusting relationship with a horse.

There were also regular visits by groups from aged care and disability facilities keen to interact with the animals.

When COVID-19 scuttled riding lessons last March, Andrea used the opportunity to expand her work with a small number of disabled participants and widened the farm experience to include a menagerie of friendly animals. As for many of the participants of Andrea's programs, the impact on Jaylee has been profound.

"Two years ago, I didn't have a passion," Jaylee reveals. "I'm a completely different person now. It's changed my life."

"When I'm with River, I get to be someone who doesn't have barriers. It's total freedom for me. I am able to be Jaylee without cerebral palsy. River was the first horse I

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was matched with so he's been a big part of my journey. I get very emotional when I talk about him, but he brings out everything I have learned to do. He takes care of me. I consider him my best friend."

The impacts of Jaylee's conditions are numerous, affecting her balance, hearing, eyesight, fine motor skills and fatigue levels. But with River, none of that seems to matter.

"When I get on River, I totally forget about everything else."

Kellie agrees the program has been transformative for her daughter who previously struggled to get out of bed, refused to finish her schooling and shunned social events.

"They're life savers," she says of Andrea and her team. "Before, Jaylee was very depressed. Now, she's a completely different kid. She has such a busy social life, she's rarely home."

Jaylee is among a growing number of participants enjoying the therapeutic benefits of animal and nature-based activities Just Horses provides. So much has she progressed, her involvement also now includes helping out with the children's programs twice a week.

"I can be that extra pair of eyes and hands for Andrea," she says, clearly relishing her role.

All programs are provided under the NDIS (National Disability Insurance Scheme) with children aged six to 12 from around the Western District making up the majority of participants. A successful six-week pilot school holiday program wrapped up this week and adults are also welcomed with their own tailored fortnightly program.

Whatever the age, all have complex problems; some physical, some mental and in many cases a combination of both. NDIS support co-ordinator for Colac and Warrnambool Fiona Balcombe refers many participants to Andrea's programs.

"Many have mental health problems, suffered trauma or drug or domestic violence-related issues. A lot of the kids I support are under child protection and may not be living with their families," she explains. "These kids have backgrounds that are not normal. Sometimes they shut down, they can be aggressive, have meltdowns, and they can be incontinent. Andrea's program opens up a whole new world for these kids.



THRIVING: Adult program participants sisters Kajah and Katya Skrzypko and Naomi Carew with equine friend Rain. (above)

GREAT PLACE: Andrea with her eight horses on the property. (below)

SANCTUARY: Andrea's farm is beloved by her clients. (left)



It's a calm, safe environment where they feel accepted and not judged."

Animals, of which there are many at Just Horses - along with the eight horses there are also dogs, chooks, ducks, sheep and cows - are a wonderful therapy for kids with trauma, according to Fiona.

"To pet a dog or a horse is a really calming thing to do, as well as the interaction and participation the programs provide."

While animals are an integral part of the programs, the broader theme is nature-based.

"It's pretty much all outdoors activities," says Andrea. "We're next to the rail trail so we might go on nature walks, collect the eggs. On a hot day we do water sports and in winter we might build a fire and toast marshmallows or build huts. Every day is different. These kids can't do structured routines. We offer a variety of things to suit and stimulate the children."

Screens and phones, apart from Andrea's for emergency purposes, are off-limits. It's not just the children who benefit from getting back to nature.

At 46, Naomi Carew has had more than

her fair share of problems. Losing her husband, suffering a stroke and undergoing open heart surgery left the Colac resident with anxiety and mobility issues. But just a few months of fortnightly visits to Maragle Park have given her a new outlook and better coping skills.

"To be able to come out here where it's lovely and green and Andrea and the team make it very relaxed, it's wonderful," says Naomi, who enjoys nothing better than spending time with the horses.

"I love brushing them and hearing about their stories. But it's also about the group therapy. It makes me feel I am not alone with my issues and it's definitely helped me with my confidence levels."

Colac sisters Katya and Kajah Skrzypko both suffer from anxiety and depression, as well as serious physical issues. In Maragle Park, however, they have found the serenity and support to help them cope with life's problems.

"It's so peaceful here. You just feel so comfortable," says 29-year-old Katya.

Her sister agrees. "It just feels like one big family," says Kajah, 26.