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# Children, horses find peace at Avalon

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By Jim McNally

Avalon is a word etched in mystery, describing a place adorned in legend during a time of magic, enchantment and wonder.

In other words, Avalon is what you want or even need it to be.

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That is largely why founder Kimberly Clarke and members of her board finally decided on "Avalon" for their retreat farm and stables in Stony Point.

The place had originally been named with a nearly unpronounceable Sanskrit word that roughly translated as "heaven on earth." But for those it most serves – young people who have walked a troubled path – Avalon was a better fit.

"It's perfect for what we do," Clarke said Monday after receiving a \$4,400 grant from the Ronald McDonald House Charities of North Carolina.

The check was presented to Clarke and Avalon board of directors member Courtney Phillips by Michael Neader, who owns all eight McDonalds

restaurants in Iredell County and another one in Mecklenburg.

What Clarke and others do at Avalon is transport kids to a place of safe surroundings and good thoughts. A kind of therapy known as equine facilitated experiential learning (EFEL) is practiced at the facility.

As outlined in a brochure for Avalon, EFEL grew from a realization that "horses are a wonderful aid to self-growth and self-awareness... horses have the ability to access what people often cannot. They have innate wisdom and inner knowing."

For each child the concerns are different and their experiences on the farm and around the animals – especially the horses – bring different relief.

"The horses help me deal with my sadness," said Ethan Cook, who turns 11 later this month. "I get sad about my mom and Lucky talks to me and makes me feel better."

What does Lucky say?

"He just talks. Sometimes I cry but I feel better when he's done," Ethan added.

Lucky is one of the four horses at Avalon. Rescued by Clarke – like all the animals at the farm – horse and boy have things in common, including learning that sadness is temporary and they are going to be safe.

Justin Leatherman, 12, admits to a temper that flares up.

"Somehow, the horses help me with my anger issues," Justin said. "Sometimes my fuse gets lit and the horses help me find peace."

For Sierra Goble, 13, that serenity is inviting.

"I just like being here," she said. "I like being on the farm and being with the horses and the whole environment. It's just really peaceful here and I like that."

But Monday was more of a workday than a fun day at Avalon. About 15 kids and a handful of adults were there to expand a chicken coop.

Greg Allsbury said he liked the work. It took the 10-year-old a little while to make the turn on the learning curve involved with a post-hole digger. But once he did, it was hard to stop him from digging deeper.

"I really like coming here and being around the animals and riding the horses," he said. "But right now, I have to help get this bird cage done."

Avalon is located about 10 miles west of Statesville.

For more information about the retreat and both children's and adults classes held there, call [704-585-6377](tel:704-585-6377) or go to the Avalon website at [www.healingwithhorses.com](http://www.healingwithhorses.com).

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