

Abused Leesburg boy making progress at foster-home farm

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A crowd of grownups in suits today will troop into a courtroom and start arguing about how best to help a 13-year-old Leesburg boy who is happiest when a miniature donkey named Festus takes hold of the pocket of his jeans and tows him around the farm where they live.

One part of the fight was settled earlier in the week when the state backed off its push to increase the anti-psychotic medicines the boy is taking. The folks who take care of him say they suspect the powerful psychotropic drugs the boy is taking are at the root of his fits of anger, and they want to give life a try without them. Now, they'll get their chance.

Much has changed for this boy since late May, when he was about to be released from a psychiatric hospital in Ocala. Readers may remember that the state had begun to try to find him adoptive parents.

That hasn't happened. But he has landed in an excellent foster home that could turn out to be where he stays permanently.

The abuse in the boy's life started before he reached his second birthday, and by the time he turned 5, state investigators finally had taken him and his sister away from his mother and put them in foster homes. He left behind repeated sexual abuse and beatings. But he took with him memories that haunt him. For example, he remembers watching his 9-year-old sister being forced to have sex with the men who came to visit Mommy.

The healing should have started when the state got hold of the boy, but it didn't. Instead, the state Department of Children & Families shuffled the youngster, who turned 13 last month, through more than 20 foster homes, sometimes staying only a day or two at each.

Over eight years, he was "repeatedly revictimized and retraumatized," according to his mental-health evaluations. A recent one says that the department failed to meet his physical or emotional needs.

That's a polite way of saying no one cared. The boy and his fits of rage are hard to deal with, and most of the foster parents just gave in to get along and keep the drama to a minimum. None ever made a serious attempt to fix him.

Positive interaction with animals

After years of neglect, the boy has a diagnosis: He is suffering from severe post-traumatic stress disorder of the type experienced by soldiers in war.

He exhibits a second serious mental condition called reactive attachment disorder, which most often is found in children who never have loved or been loved by another human being. A person with that syndrome has a hard time caring about others, understanding the importance of personal boundaries and empathizing with others.

Is it really possible that a child born in America in this day and age could be loved by no one? It is. His eyes tell the story. Around the little donkey with big ears, the teen's light blue eyes flicker with connection and emotion. When things aren't going his way, a blink brings down a shadow of vacancy. It's as if he has deliberately closed that window to his inner self.

He is hard to read, this child. Since his release from The Vines Hospital in Ocala — where he was molested by his roommate, it came out during a therapy session — the boy has been in a foster home in Hernando County, where he has made big strides in stabilizing his life.

His 48-year-old single foster mom runs an equine center, where she cares for horses rescued from the racing industry along with a variety of other critters, including a deaf and half-blind border collie. The teen dropped easily into her life, and his improvement made perfect sense to her. Unlike other foster mothers, she expected it.

Her theory is that when children understand that humans are responsible for animals, and that things must be done every day, a sense of stability pervades. She that believes kids and animals interact in a natural way that is healthy for both — if given the opportunity. And she gives plenty of opportunity.

On a recent afternoon, chaos reigned in the cab of her pickup truck with her three foster boys on the way home from school. One had just arrived at the farm and was silent, taking it all in. The other two were feeling sick, the youngest unnerved by court proceedings during which his parents' rights to him were being cut off forever. Everybody was hot, irritated and bickering.

They pulled into the gate at home, and she announced that Festus had been sick all day — a touch of donkey diarrhea. Immediately, the focus changed. The youngest boy, 6, jumped out and ran for the donkey, with the Leesburg boy right behind. Cures were applied. Festus was petted and consoled. Calm returned.

Sudden, violent outbursts

Still, progress is not without its roadblocks, and the teen is facing a big one: anger. He can't seem to let it go. He hasn't learned to walk away from a fight, to stop picking on kids on the bus, to talk rather than break things to make his point.

The outbursts are sudden and violent, in contrast to his foster mom's always-measured and unfailingly reasoned responses.

But how much of these tantrums became part of his behavior pattern when nobody swatted his fanny years ago for behaving like a heathen, and how much may be caused by the anti-psychotic drug that he is taking?

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The counselor with whom he has the closest bond and who sees him regularly wrote that he should be taken off each of his medications individually to "determine the source of the severe aggression, rage, anxiety and restless sleep patterns.

She also noted that his sister, who has been adopted by another family, reacted with fits of rage that vanished when she stopped taking the same drug. In the coming weeks, those around the young teen will be watching carefully to see whether his behavior improves.

The power of love

This boy is in a rare position for a foster child — the people close to him care enough to brave the problems that may come from reducing or eliminating his psychotropic drugs. And shouldn't that be the goal?

The foster mom in this boy's case isn't afraid of his outbursts. She meets them with a seemingly endless supply of patience. Her intention is to get to the heart of them and teach him self-control. That's far different from getting him to simply shut up.

She has said since the boy's arrival in June at her farm that she wants to adopt a child, but she is proceeding with caution, for both their sakes. The two have a fragile bond of caring — one that the psychiatrists doubted he ever could establish. Amazing, isn't it, the power of love?

So, as autumn days roll by, the boy will be working his way through the seventh grade with the goal of no more school suspensions. (There was a slip-up last week.) Warm afternoons will be filled with looking after horses, and, of course, playing with Festus.

Somehow, that seems appropriate. After all, as the boy told his grandmotherly guardian ad litem, "Me and Festus — we're both rescues."

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