

Myra Heckenlaible-Gotto

Cottonwood County's Faces of Hope award winner

Myra Heckenlaible-Gotto has found her niche in the world of psychology and the way she can help people. In fact, there are not many psychologists who do what she does with her "Crossing Life's Bridges" business.

Last April she completed a two-year program, graduating from the Touched By a Horse program based in Colorado. Now she is a Certified Equine Gestalt Coach, which means she uses the instincts of horses to help people with whatever challenges people may be facing in life.

And it's that work with victims of domestic and sexual violence and sexual exploitation that resulted in the Southwest Crisis Center naming Myra as the 2017 Faces of Hope Award winner for Cottonwood County.

"For once I was speechless," she says. "To have some recognition, it's very appreciated, but very humbling, because there are a lot of people who help people."

One individual from each of the five counties in the Southwest Crisis Center was recognized for their work with survivors or community awareness. According to Kari Voss-Drost, assistant director at the Southwest Crisis Center, those individuals could be people who work with survivors or awareness through the Southwest Crisis Center, or someone who doesn't have that much contact with the Center, but still works to support survivors or brings awareness to the community regarding domestic and sexual violence and sexual exploitation.

Heckenlaible-Gotto is recognized for her work with survivors.

"I have a very strong belief that we all have gifts, but so many times those gifts are out of our awareness because of what's happened to us," she explains. "So, for me, a big thing is helping people unravel that or to be willing to look at things in a different way, or just breath and say, 'Right here, right now, is this possible?' But it has to be at their time."

Over her 30 years in the field of psychology and education, Heckenlaible-Gotto estimates that the majority of people with whom she has worked

— children to adults — have had some type of emotional, physical, sexual or violence-related issues.

She has three objectives when it comes to serving her clients — achieving goals, personal growth and healing. In some cases all three can apply to a particular client. In other instances, perhaps achieving one or two of those keys is all that's needed.

Heckenlaible-Gotto, who has a Doctorate in Educational Psychology and Counseling, is celebrating her one-year anniversary in her work with people, through horses. Not only is she a Certified Equine Gestalt (German for "wholeness") Coach in her own business, she is excited to be a Foundation Trainer for Touched By a Horse and will be traveling to Colorado to train new people entering the program.

So, what is a CEGC, exactly? Is she a "horse whisperer?" No, she doesn't tame or train horses.

Instead, you might say her horses, which are not particularly special horses, are "people whisperers." Obviously, horses cannot talk to people, but Heckenlaible-Gotto has received special training to recognize the messages horses share when interacting with people.

"I went through two intensive years of training to partner with my horses," Heckenlaible-Gotto explains. She also has built an office and indoor arena where she can work with people and bring people and her horses together. "People come here voluntarily. This is a different way of helping people heal and grow. People might think this is outside the box a bit, but the horses have such a healing presence."

Heckenlaible-Gotto discovered this program three years ago and says it fits everything she believes and for which she was trained. Moreover, it fits her as a person as well as her spiritual beliefs.

"Horses sense things. The horses are my co-partners and I'm watching how they respond to the different energy and the different feel that's going on," she continues. "Because the horses are living, breathing creatures, they sense so much. They were a prey animal, so they pick up on things very quickly. That's how they survived. So, they're



MYRA HECKENLAIBLE-GOTTO of rural Windom, a licensed psychologist and Certified Equine Gestalt Coach, has received the Southwest Crisis Center's Faces of Hope Award for Cottonwood County in 2017. She was honored along with four others from neighboring counties at Saturday's fundraising banquet.

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very intuitive.

"I'll watch what the horses are doing and that's how I ask my coaching-type questions."

That people/horse interaction can involve individuals, groups of just two to four people, or sometimes it can be larger groups. She may host various events, such as workshops and retreats, as well as team-building for small businesses. She enjoys partnering with other service agencies to create programs or groups that target a specific population.

In addition to being a Certified Equine Gestalt Coach, she also is a licensed psychologist. However, unlike typical psychologists, she works independently and does not work through insurance companies. Currently her primary focus is on her coaching practice. When she chose this avenue, it was a giant step into the unknown, indeed, a step of faith.

Indeed, this type of work was not what she did for most of her 30-year career. While she has worked with people in private practice and college settings, most of those years were spent working with students in a school setting. In fact, she fully intended to be doing that right up until there were changes at the school. While most would consider then going into a group or private practice, Heckenlaible-Gotto did something out of the mainstream.

"Some people said, 'You'll never make it,' and I said, 'You know what, God sends people here who need it,'"

she says.

She pursued two professional desires, or bucket-list items — an opportunity to teach at a university and an opportunity to meld her life's work with her roots as a farm girl by working with horses to help people heal.

The chance to satisfy both wants came within two months of each other. During the 2014-15 school year, she taught courses two days a week as a visiting assistant professor in psychology at her alma mater, Augustana University in Sioux Falls. Two months before accepting the one-year teaching job, the opportunity to be trained as an Equine Gestalt Coach also happened. She did both for a year, then completed her Gestalt Coach training the next year.

While she loved teaching and would do it again in the right situation, she realizes that what she does now as a CEGC is achieving her business's name — helping people in "Crossing Life's Bridges . . . Bit by Bit."

"The reason I picked the name 'Crossing Life's Bridges' is because it's very transitional work and 'cross' is symbolic of my faith. So, the 'bridge' is you can't get away from your past, here's your present and you don't know what your future is — you have to cross that . . . So when people do shifts in their life, you just need a place to figure things out."

Heckenlaible-Gotto is not only providing that opportunity, but now has been honored for it.