

From Tough Guy to Needing to be Needed

Every once in awhile you meet a kid pretending to be a “bad actor”, frankly, a punk. I’ve met a lot of these kids via the Community Service program at Equest. Kids who have got in trouble with the law for minor infractions come to Equest to repay their debt. Basically, they come to get their juvenile record “erased”. Most of the kids are good kids who’ve made bad choices. When the kids get together there is a tendency to try and be “cool” by bringing out the “bad actor-tough guy” image. I’ve found a simple solution to this dilemma: Separate the kids! Unfortunately, every once in awhile one of these kids won’t let go of the bad actor-tough guy image even when segregated from the group. Tony Mondor was one of those kinds of kids and he had a life history of “minor infractions”.

Tony sauntered into the barn wearing his big-legged baggy pants (3 sizes too big), scuffing his feet, with a scowl and a daring look in his eyes, a bandanna wrapped around his head, he was barely 5 foot tall: Your basic image of a young punk. You wanted to laugh but knew it would be catastrophic. That was the image that Tony had portrayed to any authority figure he thought cast a glance in his direction. He exhibited a very small amount of respect for others and even less for himself. Yes, where Tony was concerned, definitely a defiant attitude existed. Only Tony’s mother still believed he could turn his life around but even she was beginning to lose hope. His mother had been warned that this was Tony’s last chance and the next step for him would be long-term residence at a juvenile correction facility. We decide that to start with, Tony would work his Community Service hours on “off” days: Days when there were no classes. My first question to Tony after all the paperwork was completed was “Are you read to get to work?” His response was a dull, “Whatever.”

We worked hard all day. I’d look over and the “punk” just wouldn’t give up. I’d say, “Good job Tony! Keep it up!” His response was a dull, “Whatever”. The day was getting late and we were behind. The horses needed to be brought in from the pasture. Tony had worked hard all day but as I watched him I saw he was timid and unsure of himself. Horses are large animals and can be very intimidating if you’ve never been around them and don’t understand their body language. One of the horses, by the name of TV, walked up to the gate. Tony asked, “Will he let me touch him?” I said, “Why don’t you ask him.” Tony cocked an eyebrow and said, “You’re kidding. Yeah, right. Whatever.” I said, “No, I’m not kidding. Hold out your hand and watch his ears, his expression, and let him smell you.”

Reluctantly at first, Tony held out his hand and TV sniffed, ears pricked forward in gently curiosity. I could tell Tony was apprehensive but determined. He did not withdraw his hand and soon TV was licking the back of Tony’s hand. Tony petted him softly on his neck and TV rubbed against his arm wanting more. Tony exclaimed, “He likes me! Cool!” Tony’s eyes sparkled and he smiled for the first time all day. We got the horses in and fed and watered. It was cold, and all the horses needed blankets. We got it done. We swept the isles and took out the trash all the while Tony talked non-stop about how “cool” TV was. Tony’s mom came to pick him up and asked how things went. Tony exclaimed, “Great

mom! Come look and meet this really cool horse. His name's TV..."

That was the beginning. It has been well over a year now and still Tony comes out to the barn every weekend rain or shine, holiday or not. Tony finished his Community Service obligation months ago. He's there in the stifling heat of the summer and the biting cold of winter. He's like a sponge absorbing more and more knowledge.

He loves working with our riders and never utters an unkind word. He has patience and understanding beyond his years. Tony exhibits a positive cheerful attitude. He works hard and helps clean stalls, helps to feed and water, and yes, he even takes out the trash.

Tony has advanced way beyond that however. Additionally, Tony works as a program volunteer in classes as a leader or side-walker. He is always ready to accept a challenge.

When a class is short of volunteers, he's ready and willing. When we have special events

that require long laborious hours, most volunteers work a portion of the day in shifts. Tony works all of the shifts. Sometimes it makes for a very long day. He seldom complains, and indeed is very much the gentleman. He honors and respects equally young and old, slow and bright, weak and strong, and, followers and leaders without bias.

He has a certain kind of gentleness about him that the horses appreciate. His touch is firm but soothing. He is quick to forgive and never harsh or unyielding. It is for these reasons that Tony was honored as Equest's "2001 Junior Volunteer of the Year" and most recently, Tony was selected and honored as Dallas County's "2001 Youth Volunteer of the Year". These are incredible honors considering that less than 2 years ago Tony was a kid on the brink of disaster and the eyes that fell upon him then saw a sloppy worthless and ill-mannered young punk. The eyes that fall upon Tony now see a well-groomed helpful and pleasing young gentleman.

I truly don't know what exactly turned Tony around. Perhaps the horses awakened the gently ever-giving person inside of him. Perhaps Tony needed someone to believe in him more than he believed in himself. Perhaps Tony needed to be needed.

Perhaps Tony just needed a nudge. I do know Tony is a very special young man that I am proud to know. His eyes sparkle and he smiles a lot. Every once in awhile a kid lights up the angel inside of them and becomes a shining example to all of us on just how golden people can be. Tony Mondor is one of those kinds of kids.

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