

The world can be a painful place for kids. At Wonder Wood Ranch, they find love, hope, healing

DAVID RODRIGUEZ/THE SALINAS CALIFORNIAN

As children learn basic cleaning and animal care, archery and horse riding at the Salinas ranch, Marlo Schalesky also hopes to teach them that they are not alone.

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Before getting out of bed, Marlo Schalesky thinks of the new and returning children who will soon visit her at Wonder Wood Ranch.

Outside, the animals are hungry, but first she prays.

She prays for her own six kids, whom she'll soon get ready for school. But she also prays for the dozens of at-risk children that will trickle into her ranch, one by one, after school.

Wonder Wood Ranch is one of few hands-on treatment programs in Monterey County for youth experiencing grief and trauma. Here, the children learn basic cleaning and animal care, archery and horse riding. The idea is that they use the space to practice life skills while having fun.



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Marlo is an instructor, mentor and friend to the kids. Every year, more than 1,000 enter the gates – about 30 a day. Most are from Monterey County, and many are teens and children in foster care who have all experienced severe abuse and neglect.

Helping foster children is Marlo's calling, but she says lack of funding and social workers hinders the progress the children in her program can make.

Before the children arrive, Marlo slips on rain boots and heads to the barn. She feeds the animals breakfast and prepares for the day.

'A knife through my heart'

Overcoming trauma, Marlo said, is one of the biggest steps foster youth must take toward achieving a better life and pursuing an education.

Like many of the kids here, a 14-year-old named Jose started the equine therapy program to help deal with emotional trauma caused by abuse and separation from his biological family.



Roosters roam free inside the Wonder Wood Ranch on Nov. 4, 2021. DAVID RODRIGUEZ/THE SALINAS CALIFORNIAN

Jose's story encapsulates both the hope and the frustration that exists at Wonder Wood. He spent much of his time at the ranch learning to ride horses, but he also volunteered, tended to animals and taught others how to ride.

Wonder Wood soon felt like home.

"I was out there almost every day asking Marlo, 'Can I go out there? Can I go out there?' because it was very therapeutic and calming," Jose said. "It helped me to feel safe and to feel like someone was there. At first, I didn't feel like I had anyone, but it changed when I went there because they were looking into stuff with me and taking the time out of their day to talk to me about what's going on in my life."

But then social workers came and took Jose back to Fresno County. The unexpected move came as a shock to everyone.

Frustrated and frantically searching for answers, Marlo got few. Strict confidentiality rules guarding foster children foiled her efforts to find Jose.

The teen had begun to show emotional and academic progress in Marlo's program. His sudden removal was bound to put a stop to that progress, she said.

"A knife through my heart," Marlo said. "He called me from his new group home in Fresno weeks ago and he told me he cried the whole way from here to Fresno because he didn't have any warning. He was just gone, and he didn't know why."

Jose's story

After a lifetime of poverty, abuse, and neglect at home with his mother, Jose said he entered the foster care system in Fresno County. The Californian is withholding his last name because he is a minor in the foster system.

He was relocated and spent roughly six months in a Monterey County group home after agencies were unable to find the right placement for him.

Foster children in her program are frequently uprooted, according to Marlo, sometimes every month, never to be heard from again.

"What we are doing is adding trauma on trauma and destabilizing mental health in such a way that makes it very hard for kids to grow in a healthy way," she said, "to become contributors in society and do well in school."

Marlo Schalesky

I always wished that I could have a gift of healing people. I wanted to heal hearts.

It wasn't until weeks after Jose left Wonder Wood Ranch that he called to let Marlo know he was moved back to Fresno County. An agency found him another foster home closer to home.

The new placement was one of many Jose experienced.

"At first, I didn't understand it," Jose said. "I would be very sentimental with it and not want to go on but as years passed, I just adapted to it and had to grow up a little faster than normal teenagers."

Common reasons for changing a foster child's placement include unsuitable placement, adoption, or time in a specific placement has ended, according to Monterey County Department of Social Services.

"He cried," Marlo said, "because he was losing all these relationships and all the things he built."

Getting on track at Wonder Wood

Before Jose was removed from Monterey County, Marlo had been communicating with his church's youth group and his teachers to help him start planning and setting goals for his educational future.

Jose says he is one of the lucky few who remain on track in school after going through multiple placements. He credits Marlo and Wonder Wood Ranch for improving his academics and behavior.

"I would be going through a lot more and doing things I'm not supposed to be because when I first met them, I was a whole different person. But my mindset has just changed because I was around them," he said. "In school, I wasn't good and now, I'm a good student. I have decent grades because of Marlo. Every day she would ask if I did my homework or if I had reports from my group home, she would sit down and have a talk with me."

Nationwide, there are roughly 430,000 children in the foster care system. Statistics from the National Foster Youth Institute state only half of them graduate high school. No more

than 3% go on to earn a college degree. The struggle of foster youths trying to earn a college education, Marlo said, starts with mental health. Keeping the mind healthy can be a challenge without steady relationships and support systems.

Struggling parents: [Legislation aims to ease welfare-to-work rules for new California single parents](#)

"I've had plenty of kids in our program that were able to graduate, and they weren't going to, or others who were adopted," Marlo said. "I wish we could change the process, and it's not the social workers' fault, but I think they should slow down the removal process so that we can really see if there's a way for them to stay or at least we can help them through that process."

Jose says going back and forth to different schools is never easy.

"It's crazy because some schools don't teach the same thing, they're all at different levels," he said. "You move from one school to another and you kind of have to start all over again but you have to go in with that mindset that you need to do your work and you're only there for work."

Jose has dreams of one day becoming a social worker and helping kids just like him.

He does not know what the future holds for him, but he says he is confident he is on the right track to a better life and education thanks to the lessons he learned at Wonder Wood. They are lessons he says he applies every day and will never forget.

Marlo hopes to continue supporting Jose on his path to higher education. Still, she says there are many more kids like Jose and few resources available to help them.



At the hands-on treatment program in Monterey County, children learn basic cleaning and animal care, archery and horse riding as a way to practice life skills.

The origin of healing

Marlo learned about the power of fostering at an early age.

Her mother told her stories, she said, about her life in foster care, and how she'd been abandoned at 4 years old. Her mother explained how difficult it was to be alone, or with strangers in Canada's foster care system.

The one good thing, she told Marlo, was the people in the system whose kindness brought light into her world. Those people helped her overcome the emotional pain of life without a family.

"After that, I always wished that I could have a gift of healing people," Marlo said. "I wanted to heal hearts."



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Twenty years ago, Marlo and her husband bought the property to start a new chapter with their eldest child, who was about 2 years old. They built everything — the house, barns, stables and horse trail — themselves.

Marlo thought it was the perfect place to start an outdoor therapeutic program. A local church pastor soon approached her, asking for a space where teens could spend time away from their gang-ridden neighborhoods.

Crime in their neighborhoods, the pastor said, was so dangerous they were not allowed to leave their homes. Marlo welcomed the teens.

All were teenage boys, she said, who tried hard to come off as "tough guys." Their demeanors changed when they got to Wonder Wood.

Riding horses for the first time, they smiled and shouted with joy.

Soon after that first group of teens arrived, multiple county agencies approached her. They wanted to bring other young trauma victims to the ranch to help cope with emotional pain. They wanted to send them to a place where they could simply play, laugh and share new memories with other children just like them.

Feeling empowered, Marlo searched “how to start a non-profit” on Google.

And that's what she did.

A path to healing





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Each day, after a horse ride, Marlo sits with the children. She shares a meal with them or helps with homework. Most of all, Marlo is trying to share a message: They are not alone in their path to healing.

Many of the children are referred to Wonder Wood by local foster care, family service agencies, and the Monterey County District Attorney's Office.

District Attorney Jeannine Pacioni has visited the ranch several times in the last year. There have been signs of improvement among the program's clients, she said, and parents have expressed support and gratitude for Wonder Wood.

In 2021, the district attorney's office — in collaboration with the YWCA Monterey County, Monterey Rape Crisis Center, and Monterey County Behavioral Health — hosted the first Camp Esperanza at Wonder Wood Ranch.

Camp Esperanza aims to give youths a summer camp-like experience in a space where they can also learn to heal emotional pain, build resilience, interact with others, and build trust with adults.

Marlo Schalesky

What we do matters. A kid is surviving here. They're making it and what we have done here has helped them to take a next step, to move forward and know they're not alone. There's hope.

In addition to horse riding, the children learn to bathe the animals, clean their hooves, brush and braid the horses' tails and manes, paint images of cupboards and horseshoes on the barns or draw pictures of horse heads.

"Wonder Wood Ranch and their staff helped provide the perfect location for our clients to exhibit playfulness, camaraderie, enthusiasm, and have many first experiences with the horses, friendships being made, learning the ranch, and building trust with adults and other clients," Pacioni said. "We are looking forward to continuing this program with Camp Esperanza each summer moving forward."

Although Pacioni champions Wonder Wood Ranch as a community asset that helps traumatized kids heal, funding the effort is a challenge.

The price of survival

Staffing at Wonder Wood is minimal.

Marlo works with mostly family members, who volunteer, and an animal care specialist.

The ranch provides all services to foster youth free of charge – but costs to keep the animals fed can run up to \$100,000 per year.

There's another problem with few dollars available to fix: children without rides to the ranch. The lack of transportation is often due to staffing issues at group homes or caretakers with no availability for a drop-off.



specialist Jenn Keyes cleans up pieces of hay in front of the Wonder Wood Ranch on Nov. 4, 2021. DAVID RODRIGUEZ/THE SALINAS CALIFORNIAN

Marlo would like to expand operations and hire more staff – including drivers – but the ranch would need more than the small grants she receives from local foundations.

Funding for foster care mostly comes at the federal level, but if that money dries up, programs and agencies must resort to public donations or raise the money independently.

County records show foster care costs for children up to age 18 went from roughly \$9.8 million in 2010 to \$14.2 million in 2020. Foster care costs for ages 18-21 went from less than \$1 million in 2013 to \$1.4 million in 2020.

Marlo is working to learn if she is eligible for federal funding but hopes she can also find that money closer to home in the form of county funding. Wonder Wood is now in a trial one-year, county-funded program, she said.

Marlo plans to approach the Monterey County Board of Supervisors again to ask for help keeping the animals fed, the property maintained and the ranch staffed.

"It would be nice to have some paid staff. I'm doing most of the equine therapy and I'll run the groups with a few of my volunteers," Marlo said. "We like to do a lot with a little, but if we had more, we'd do more because, boy, after COVID, kids are in need."

Focusing on foster youth

Monterey County Supervisor Wendy Root Askew was not fully familiar with the Wonder Wood Ranch. The board, she said, manages various community items on a daily basis.



Children paint horseshoe murals on the walls of Wonder Wood Ranch. Not all children who visit the ranch are recovering from trauma and/or in the foster system. PROVIDED BY MARLO SCHALESKY

However, she said, the door is open for more discussions about foster care resources, future collaborations and ranch

improvements. Another option could include the ranch registering as a vendor to qualify for additional county funding.

On Jan. 6, Monterey County Board of Supervisors held a special meeting to address housing and homeless solutions along with foster care resources.

The meeting marked the first time the board addressed the local foster care system in years.

Supervisor Luis Alejo said it had been roughly five years since local foster care appeared on an agenda. That meeting was to discuss making changes to child welfare policies after a caretaker tortured and murdered two Salinas children in 2015.

During the recent meeting, officials said they aim to better understand current policies and to find out what work needs to be done in other sectors or programs for foster youths.

Jose, a teenager at Wonder Wood Ranch

It helped me to feel safe and to feel like someone was there. At first, I didn't feel like I had anyone, but it changed when I went there because they were looking into stuff with me and taking the time out of their day to talk to me about what's going on in my life.

Supervisors said their goal is to soon bring local foster care resources to the attention of the full board.

“I think the community would like to hear it. We talk a lot about disadvantaged communities but what about youth that are often not talked about very much in terms of policies and focus?” Alejo said. “We need to find those opportunities to highlight this work.”

'There's hope'



Marlo Schalesky next to one of her rescue horses on Nov. 4,

2021.DAVID RODRIGUEZ/THE SALINAS CALIFORNIAN

At night, when the children are gone and the ranch is quiet, Marlo lies in bed awake.

The stories of the children weigh heavy on her mind.

Stories of abuse – both physical and sexual – suffered at the hands of family.

Stories of young girls and boys whose parents sold them to sexual predators for drugs.

Stories of children who, despite all the suffering, say they still love and want their parents around.

“Sometimes, I just feel so horrified because of the things that people do to kids,” she said. “Even though I hear it every day, I’m shocked because the things that people do to other people are just horrible.”

Despite the tales of trauma she encounters every day with the children, Marlo is confident that Wonder Wood Ranch changes young lives for the better.

“What we do matters,” she said. “A kid is surviving here. They’re making it and what we have done here has helped them to take a next step, to move forward and know they’re not alone. There’s hope.”

Marlo sets down her Apple watch to charge, closes her eyes. She waits for the morning sunlight to hit her face and wake her for another day with the children.