

Isle of Wight equine farm comes to the rescue for kids



1 OF 5 PHOTOS:

Trust and bonding is the goal for NaiQuawn, mentor Edie Fischer and Little Oz at Diamonds in the Rough. (James Thomas Jr. | Special to The Virginian-Pilot)

[View all 5 photos](#) | [Buy Pilot photos](#)

By James Thomas Jr.
Virginian-Pilot correspondent
© June 2, 2013

"Teachers were calling up all the time. He would kick things, kick his desk, tear up paper, break crayons - just a lot of anger problems. We were constantly taking him out and putting him in different classes. It was really bad."

That's how Matlene, a mother of two from the East End of Newport News, described the first two years of 9-year-old MaAlik's time in public school.

His behavior seemed to steadily worsen until he got enrolled in an experimental, three-year urban intervention program, the Newsome-Bailey Project.

In partnership with Newport News Public Schools, the after-school academy provides educational therapy for at-risk children. Named after attorney J. Thomas Newsome and singer Pearl Bailey, its goal

is to reverse alarming school dropout rates that often lead to crime and prison.

Part of the program is a monthly day trip to an equine rescue farm in Isle of Wight County called Diamonds in the Rough. Seven East End children are enrolled in the pilot program; all third-grade boys chosen by the school system.

"It's part of the therapy to find out if we can make a difference," said Sonja Reuter, co-owner of Diamonds in the Rough. "Most of these children have never been on this side of the bridge, gone to a camp or boating.

"They live with single mothers or grandmothers and some have had fathers killed. There's been two or three whose fathers have been killed since this program started. Seven or eight of them have no fathers at all. It's that bad."

The 100-acre farm has about 110 horses, half of them rescued. The idea is that by pairing the children with neglected and abused horses, both will heal through bonding. The children spend four hours on a Saturday learning to ride, groom and take responsibility for their assigned horses and learn about farm life. Each child is also paired with an adult mentor throughout the program.

Parents were invited to the farm in early May to observe what their children had learned during the year. There were contests and prizes awarded for horsemanship, including use and identification of different tack, gear and clothing.

"We wanted to develop a program with a holistic approach to invest in the whole child, not just the educational and cognitive areas," said Ken Surles-Law, director of the Newsome-Bailey Project.

Eligibility for the program is determined by testing, explained Wanda Parks, an advisor to the project from the National Institute for Learning Development.

"They are given an IQ test at the beginning of the program and at the end of three years they'll be getting IQ tests again," Parks said. "Each year, they are given the Woodcock-Johnson Achievement Test to measure those gains. They must make meaningful gains in reading, math and writing to stay in the program."

"It was a whole new lifestyle for me, gave me an awareness of needs of children that I never knew,"

Reuter said. "I had one little boy tell me that he didn't like white people. And I said we're white and he said, 'Yes, but you're different.'"

Within the past year, the Newsome-Bailey Project formed a corporation and was approved for nonprofit status as the Newsome-Bailey Academy. It operates a similar program at Park Place School in Norfolk.

The kids have summer activities too: camping, swimming and weekly tutoring programs, Surles-Law said. The program enters the last year of the three-year trial in October. School officials will review progress to determine if it made a difference.

"It really made a big difference for us," Matlene said about her son MaAliek. "His grades have improved. He's paying better attention. His reading skills improved a lot... I was so excited when I got his progress report. So it's been quite a journey."

"When they get around the horse, all of their troubles go away for a while," said Doug Nowell, a Diamonds mentor and volunteer. "It improves self esteem and confidence level and that can help to improve their grades."

"Trust is the most important thing when you work with a horse. They lack a bunch of trust in people 'cause they've been hurt so much... These kids learn to trust the horse and the people who are teaching them about horses and they've come a long way to trusting people again."

James Thomas Jr., ttomas205@aol.com

