



BEST
Afterschool
Program



Boosting and Enriching
Students Today

5/23/22

To whom it may concern:

Nancy Willard brought her program Way of the Donkey to our 4J BEST Afterschool Program for the last two sessions of our academic year, from April through June 9, 2022. The program was recommended by Shelly Williams of Boys and Girls Club of Emerald Valley who had recently offered it at her afterschool program.

Our program serves marginalized students, experiencing academic and other deficits at school and in their home lives. After a year of online learning, these deficits were exacerbated by a lack of basic socialization and problem-solving and coping skills. Our students so desperately need the neural and social-emotional stimulation of animals, caring adults and curriculum that cultivates social-emotional capacity in their lives, especially as they deal with the stresses of living in an ongoing pandemic from day to day. Through Way of the Donkey, Nancy teaches young people critical life skills, based on common donkey behaviors, such as forming close bonds with a "buddy," mutual grooming (reaching out to be kind), to be curious & learn new things (building your strengths), to be thankful when receiving encouragement (such as a carrot or kind gesture), and to stop, stay calm, stand tall and think things through when faced with a strange or difficult situation.

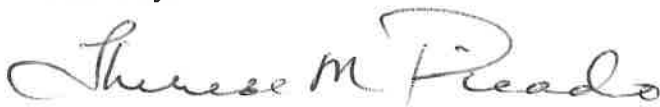
I have been so impressed with this curriculum and the transformations it has engendered in our students. Through Nancy's coaching and their interactions with their new donkey friends, students have acquired empowering skills such as calming themselves around the donkeys and elsewhere by tapping their upper sternums and activating their thymus gland positively; attentively grooming the donkeys to allow them to form caring, giving relationships; modeling kind but firm leadership by leading the donkeys through an obstacle course and by teaching other primary adults in their lives, teachers and parents, how to do this effectively; and being inspired by their donkey friends to stop, stay calm, stand tall and think things through when facing an obstacle or difficult situation. It is amazing to witness the tender bonds that are formed between the donkeys and the children and the delight that the children experience from interacting with their donkey friends.

As they have internalized these empowering life skills, our students have already begun to demonstrate greater resilience and socialization and coping skills. Now quite frequently, we see students applying the learning acquired in their interactions with the donkeys in their daily lives. While students are leading a donkey through the obstacle course, they

might initially be too timid and the donkey might stop or stray from the course; Nancy verbally coached one 5th grade student to envision himself walking through the middle school hall next year, standing tall and proud, and you could visibly see the student stand more erect and lead the donkey with greater confidence. Another excitable younger student was a bit too rambunctious around the donkey and the donkey was wary; Nancy asked him what he could do to calm himself and he immediately did the thymus tapping and calmed right down and began grooming the donkey appropriately. Nancy has mediated conflicts between students using these principles; instead of flipping their lid, they have engaged their frontal cortex, stopped and thought things through and acknowledged hurtful behaviors toward others and actively sought to repair these actions by apologizing and choosing other more positive and relationship-building behaviors. In just a few weeks of this program, teachers are noticing that their students are exhibiting signs of greater happiness as they model more respectful, kind, and compassionate behavior.

I highly recommend this program for all children as it supports resilience, empowerment, and fun. Feel free to reach out to me to discuss this program further.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Therese M Picado". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Therese M Picado
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