

Local News About Local People

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Nancy Willard leads Donkey Empowerment Life Coaching for a summer class at Elmira Elementary School with the help of her son Bakul, Bella who is standing next to Bakul, and Opie who is standing next to Willard.

Working with donkeys to empower students

By Michelle Ossowski

Fern Ridge-Tribune News

ELMIRA – Fern Ridge School District students engaged in summer learning, were able to become more empowered and confident after working with donkeys.

Nancy Willard created the Way of the Donkey, a program to teach students about compassion for others and a new approach to prevent

bullying. Willard has now created a Donkey Empowerment Life Coaching program she has been bringing to Elmira Elementary School on Wednesdays and Fern Ridge Middle School on Thursdays to students while summer school has been in session.

Willard has been bringing her son Bakul and two of her donkeys to each of the schools once a week for about 50 minutes. Bakul has been helping her with the donkeys;

they generally bring Bella, a white and grey donkey, and Opie, a dark grey donkey.

"I have had the pleasure of working with all the grades and the special services class and my primary focus when I go to the schools is on increasing three strengths. Self-regulation is the first strength; students have to remain calm so as not to scare the

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Second grade students walked Bella and Opie through an obstacle course created with pool noodles, around flowerpots, and on a plank.

"Some students do not want to walk the donkey and I do not pressure them, but I do encourage them. I have found if I get them to walk away from the group, starting out with both of us holding the lead, I can drop the lead and say, "Hey, you are walking the donkey," then I ask if they would like to try the obstacle course; they generally do," said Willard. "Then I talk with them about feeling the fear and getting past it. I suggest that the next time they feel afraid, they should remember when they were afraid to walk a donkey and got past their fear."

Willard talks about how you have to stand tall and speak with a confident voice to get a donkey to move. If a student comes up timidly, takes the lead and whispers "walk on," her donkeys don't move. A student has to stand tall, and assertively say "walk on" for her donkeys to move and Willard works on this specifically.

"There was one student who required quite a bit of support and she had the opportunity of a second time. Without additional coaching, she stepped up to the donkey, stood tall, head held high, and said with strength, "walk on," and the donkey did," Willard said.

If a donkey does an obstacle incorrectly, the student and donkey have to repeat that obstacle so the donkey doesn't learn it's okay to do things wrong. When Willard

stepped in to have a student repeat a mistake Bella made with an obstacle, the student panicked.

"I told him it was important that he become calm and he had obviously been taught this and started to deep breathe. Then, problem solving, I suggested that if he walk the donkey around in a circle and come onto the plank straight, this might work; he did, and she walked the plank perfectly," said Willard. "This student triggered, was able to calm himself, was able to take a different approach, and succeeded; he was able to stop and stay calm, stand tall, and think things through."

Lisa Leatham, the principal at Veneta Elementary School said, "The donkeys are part of the summer school programming this year and each grade level K-5 has had a chance to be a part of the program throughout the summer."

"Going around obstacles is fun. We all face obstacles and by getting through those obstacles we gain strengths."