



'In My Shoes': New feature lets women share stories

BY SUNDRA HOMINIK
 MEDIA GENERAL NEWS SERVICE

Women of Virginia and Tennessee, we know you are as strong as the stately columns that grace the front of our impressive state Capitols. You're as smart as Michelle Obama (even if you don't have a Harvard law degree). And you are as fierce as those stiletto thigh-high boots you just after but don't have the guts to buy. But admit it. Even though you are totally together, sometimes you need a friend, sister or someone to talk with about the

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important things and maybe even the little things in life. Sometimes you need to be able to talk with someone who has lived through what you're going through, someone who has cried over it or maybe laughed about it. You want to talk to someone who has walked in your shoes. "In My Shoes" offers that. We want this weekly feature to be your connection to women who have been there and are willing to share their wisdom.

Some topics will be lighthearted and fun, while others will be more serious. We'll ask experts and everyday women to share their comments, advice and thoughts. Some of the women we talk to will be just like you. Others might be women you would not normally sit down with to share a glass of wine. But all of them will have thoughts worth hearing. We hope this will become a community of women willing to help each other. In addition to the column, we'll expand the conversation

online through video interviews with women who have advice and insights to share. Sometimes, we'll host online lunch chats about the topic of the week. Also, you'll be able to add your voice by posting comments and suggesting topics you would like us to discuss in future columns. Some of the topics we plan to explore in the next few weeks include:

- **How to keep those New Year's resolutions.**
- **How to get the most out of your trip to a day spa.**
- **What to do to improve your mother-daughter relationship.**

JOIN THE SISTERHOOD OF THE SHOES

EDITOR'S NOTE: The *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, a sister paper of the *Bristol Herald Courier*, launched a new weekly column on Jan. 10. "In My Shoes" is for women to share advice, insight and inspiration on topics important to them. This week, the *Herald Courier* is running the initial column and today's column in an effort to catch up with senior editor Sundra Hominik, and the women who have already responded to her call to join the Sisterhood of the Shoes (SOS). Readers are invited become a fan on Facebook/shoes.rtd and share their stories. Hominik welcomes discussion topics by e-mail at shominik@timesdispatch.com.

And, just who is this sister leading the charge? Hominik, one of the original members of the SOS, has been a senior editor with the *Times-Dispatch* for three years. Originally from Tennessee, she has traveled to 30 states and lived in nine of them. She spent her 50th birthday exploring the Olympic Mountains in Washington. She loves all kinds of shoes but does not own a pair of stiletto thigh-high boots.



Resolutions don't have to end in failure; a few suggestions

BY SUNDRA HOMINIK
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By now, some of you who took the plunge into the deep end of the resolutions pool may be having some difficulty staying afloat. As soon as you sipped that last glass of champagne at midnight, you self-assuredly pledged to do better in the new year. You resolved to drink less. Eat more healthfully. Exercise more. Somehow, many of us think that by simply promising to change, we will. Others (including me) are not so optimistic about change. I didn't make any resolutions this year. It's not that I think I'm perfect. It's just that I have learned from experience. I have the unused exercise equipment to prove it. Mary Larson, 44, of Richmond says she also has learned that it doesn't make sense for her to

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make New Year's resolutions. "How many people do you know who have succeeded?" she asked. "I think you're just setting yourself up for failure." However, Larson does see the benefit of setting self-improvement goals. When she sets a goal, she said she works hard to make it happen. For instance, she has already determined that she will have an awesome garden this year. "I love to garden so I have a vision in my head of what I want the garden to look like in the spring," she said. "I use positive visualization. I've figured out what works for me." And for those of you who made resolutions, what can you do to keep those pledges? Even though resolution has almost become a dirty word, it doesn't have to end in failure,

said Amy Knowles, an area life coach. Knowles, founder of the Life Enrichment Center of Virginia, said resolutions can motivate us to make important changes that we've been thinking about, and they can get us on track toward achieving those changes. Her advice for succeeding with resolutions includes writing down very specific, realistic goals. She suggests that you place that list in a place where you will see it often throughout the year. Carroll Schuller, another local life/business coach, agrees that writing down your resolutions is a good first step. But she cautions not to rush writing them down. Think about the goals first. "Well-thought-out resolutions are never bad," Schuller said. Another bit of advice she offers is to make sure to pick the right resolutions.

"It is always great if you can create some resolutions that make you happier. Pick something that gives you a glimmer of joy when you consider it," she said. She also suggests finding a partner to help stay on target. That person should have also set some goals so you can help each other. That makes a lot of sense. We all need someone to help encourage us along the way. Then when you've managed to keep your resolutions, you'll have someone to help celebrate your success. Schuller predicts that 2010 will be a good year for keeping resolutions. She said after coming off a tough year, most people are bound to set more realistic goals, and that likely will mean more of you will follow through on your promises to yourselves.



Christopher Watkins, 8, leads Moxie around at Pinnacle Ranch in Kingsport. Christopher is autistic and through the facility's therapy program has shown progress in relating to his surroundings. "When he sees that the horse is dirty, he picks up the brush to groom it; this has translated to helping at home with the dishwasher and other tasks," said Ellen Stroud, equine specialist at the ranch.

Christopher's story inspires all who have known autism

BY ANN YUNGMEYER
 SPECIAL TO THE HERALD COURIER

KINGSFORT, Tenn. – Christopher is an 8-year-old autistic child who can relate to the horses at Pinnacle Ranch. "We have seen phenomenal changes in this child," Stroud said. "When he first came to us, he was not speaking, but after learning to 'shake hands' with the horse, he began to say hello to people. When he sees that the horse is dirty, he picks up the brush to groom it; this has translated to helping at home with the dishwasher and other tasks." Christopher's mom, Erin Watkins, shared their experience at Pinnacle Ranch: "Initially, we set up a visit/evaluation for Christopher to see if the program would be right for him. He was very shy and didn't make much contact at first. He cried and would not go into the barn. He liked the horses, and it took a bit for him to warm up to them, so I started bringing him every Friday for a 12-week session. When I would ask him if he wanted to go see the horses, he would whine and say no. I would have to get him out of the car and into the arena to get him started and then sneak out. He would not always speak to Ellen and Nicole at first. "I began to notice when we would be out or someone would come to the house he would speak to them saying 'Hello' or 'Hi, guys' or acknowledge them in some way which he rarely did

YOU SHOULD KNOW

- **What:** Pinnacle Ranch
- **Where:** 416 Cannongate Road, Kingsport, TN, 37660
- **Phone:** (423) 754-4242
- **Web:** pinnacle-ranch.net
- **E-mail:** infor@pinnacle-ranch.net

WISH LIST

Pinnacle Ranch welcomes donations of items and services. For more information, visit online at www.pinnacle-ranch.net/thehorseaffect.html. Some additional items which are always welcome include:

- cones
- barrels
- hula hoops
- gravel
- fill dirt
- shavings
- wood boards
- brushes
- buckets
- hay
- scholarships for veterans
- scholarships for children
- gutter expertise

before. I also noticed him talking more. He communicated at first by repeating movie scenes. He would take dialog from one of the Disney movies that related to whatever situation he was in, and that's what he would talk about. "Toward the end of the sessions at Pinnacle Ranch, when we arrived he would throw off his seat belt and climb over me to get out of the car to get to the horses [Moxie, the miniature, is his favorite] before I could even get out of my seat belt. "Christopher attends preschool, daycare and occupational therapy. His caretakers have done so many great things for him; he would not be where he is today without them. With the addition of the therapy at Pinnacle Ranch, he has just come out of his shell. "He is doing so many things now that he wasn't doing even two months ago. He will follow short simple directions; we can even have a very short conversation where I will ask him a question and he will answer me! Then, sometimes, he will even answer another question. I can ask him to help me or to do things, and he will, which he would never do before." Erin is hopeful that Christopher will have more opportunities to participate in therapy sessions at Pinnacle Ranch.

Equine specialists Ellen Stroud, left, and Holly Hopson operate Pinnacle Ranch in Kingsport, Tenn., which offers an equine-assisted psychotherapy program.



THERAPY

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people a chance to think from different perspectives and practice new behaviors," Stroud said. Pinnacle Ranch has helped autistic children, juvenile offenders, war veterans and even office workers improve communication skills and gain self confidence in dealing with personal challenges. "In some cases, we have individuals who have come to try a different therapy because nothing else is working or they are uncomfortable seeking traditional counseling," Stroud said. "EAP is more than talking about solutions; it is hands-on, and therefore easier for some learning styles." The program is applicable for individuals with psychological, behavioral and emotional issues, as well as for groups in which the goal is to facilitate interpersonal

growth and communication.

THE ROLE OF THE HORSE

Ever wondered why that horse is switching its tail or pinning its ears? The message is more subtle than that of the famous "Mr. Ed," but a horse can read a person's emotions and mirror back. "As herd animals, horses are highly sensitive to the emotions of those around them and mirror those emotions through non-verbal communication," Stroud said. "Horses help people see their own behavior," she continued. "By seeing the impact of their actions through the horse, people tend to slow down and work through issues. You're next to a 1,000-pound animal, so horses are good at making people think. They don't let you stand still." "For instance, if a child is having difficulty relating to peers," Hopson added, "our activities help the child see immediate feedback from the horse's reactions. This can be an 'ah hah'

moment when the child relates his own behavior and can make that adjustment."

LOOKING IN ON A GROUP SESSION

During a recent "open barn" tour at Pinnacle Ranch, Hopson and Stroud introduced two Paso Fino mares and a miniature horse used in therapy sessions. They demonstrated a mock session whereby a group of participants is asked to move a horse from one end of the arena to the other. The EAP team quietly observes from the sidelines and lets participants figure out on their own the best way to communicate with the horse and accomplish the task. Another exercise involves getting a horse to walk over an obstacle. Some participants want to push, while others want to pull. How do they engage the horse and how does it react? Do they work together, does one person take charge? These are questions that the therapists process and discuss with participants, allowing each

person a chance to ascertain which inner skills are called upon to complete the task. The exercise may touch on group dynamics, creative thinking, leadership, decision making, coping skills, patience and tolerance. The exercise may also demonstrate thinking processes that can be applied to real-life issues.

PROGRAMS FOR REACHING THE PINNACLE

Pinnacle Ranch works with youth and adult individuals, families and groups to identify potential growth areas, establish treatment goals and design a program to meet specific needs. Specialized programs include:

- **Team Pinnacle:** Teambuilding and leadership training for professionals and corporations to improve communication skills, problem solving skills, teamwork and performance within an organization.
- **Connections:** Assists children on the autism spectrum in

learning positive behaviors and improving communication and social skills.

- **Honors:** Substance abuse prevention for at-risk youth.
- **Operation Ranch Hand:** Serving military, veterans, spouses and families.

As the name would imply, Pinnacle Ranch is about helping people reach their pinnacle. The name is inspired from the famous psychologist Abraham Maslow's theory on the hierarchy of needs, in which basic needs are at the bottom of the pyramid and self-actualization is at the top. "This is about people learning about themselves and making positive changes," Stroud said. For more information on Pinnacle Ranch or for information on program sponsorship/scholarships, call (423) 754-4242 or visit www.pinnacle-ranch.net.

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