

Health



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Horsing around: the benefits of equine therapy

June Burgess explains how a love for the animals since childhood inspired her to set up a business where they can help people

JUNE Burgess has been at the forefront of business throughout her career. This includes the development of the Fitzwilliam Hotel in Belfast, being a leadership coach and running equine-assisted learning workshops for individuals and corporates through her organisation Horses for People at Ballygraffan Stables outside Comber.

The firm helps unlock human potential through personal development, horses and nature within the Co Down landscape.

June says: "I've loved horses ever since I was a child growing up in Whitehead. While we didn't have horses ourselves, there was a family in the farm across from us and I was very friendly with the children.

"At the end of their lane, they had ponies and I remember we'd go down and coax the horses towards us with carrots — before climbing over the fence and jumping on their backs!

"I was only young, maybe seven or eight, but there was absolutely no fear.

"I was never intimidated by them. I just loved them, and no matter how small we were, we'd just climb on board and off we went. I remember the lady in the farm told my parents she was going to send her daughter to lessons, and my parents wisely decided to do the same with me."

Once she started lessons at the riding school in Islandmagee, June was hooked.

"I learned a lot from horses from the get-go," she explains.

"For one, I realised that while I could wrap my parents around my little finger to a degree like all children, I couldn't get away

with any of that nonsense when it came to horses.

"Horses don't fall for cute and I soon understood that I'd have to figure out ways of working with them properly to get them on side.

"Overpowering them was never an option for me. I was always small so I could never force a horse to do anything they didn't want to do. I had to employ other techniques, and like so many things in life, I realised it was a careful balancing act.

"If you're too soft, they take over and if you're too tough, they switch off, you lose the connection and you won't get anywhere."

June says learning that has been hugely beneficial in her life.

"I can see how positively it impacts on other people once they figure it out at the workshops with Horses for People. It helps with everything from discipline and leadership skills to staying calm in difficult situations and all-important patience. You've got to be patient if you want to get anywhere with horses."

Working with horses can help people deal with challenging situations, with June saying the primary benefit is learning emotion regulation.

"To keep them in check," she says. "If you can't do that, you'll have problems with horses, and it's the same in life.

"The reality is all of us are hit with challenging situations right through our lives. There's no escaping that.

"The crucial thing is recognising that you can deal with whatever comes at you.

"Gaining that knowledge is a

'Patience is needed if you're going to get anywhere with horses'

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Mane attraction: June Burgess of Horses For People with Cecil

PETER MORRISON

Stable hand:
June Burgess
(also below)
with horse
Tomas
PETER MORRISON



‘When you’re faced with a huge animal, you figure out your strengths pretty quickly’

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confidence-booster in itself.

“As well as that, one of the most fascinating things to come out of the workshops is seeing people realise the strengths they have.”

“There are so many people who come along through Horses for People at Ballygraffan Stables and either didn’t know they had these strengths, they underestimated them, or they chose to ignore them because they didn’t want to feel that they were too big for their boots.”

“But once you identify a strength and realise it can be beneficial to you, and when you’re faced with a huge animal like a horse, you figure out your strengths pretty quickly.”

“This means you’re much more likely to embrace and employ them.”

June adds that when people identify their strengths and accept them as something positive that should be embraced, it certainly helps them feel more confident and puts them in a strong position to deal with challenging situations.

“When it comes to horses, you’ve got to find the balance of all your strengths and present them calmly and with confidence.”

“Horses don’t understand if you lose your temper.”

“They don’t know why you’re suddenly behaving differently, and they just don’t like it. You’ll lose the connection and you won’t progress.”

“What they need is clarity and stable emotions. All of that breeds confidence, however challenging the situation.”

June explains that there are some “fascinating” experiences at the workshops and many people surprise her.

“One man who came to Horses for People was a military veteran. When he arrived for the first time, he spoke about what I’d say were his aggressive tendencies,” she says.

“Over time things seemed to improve for him. He came back to Ballygraffan Stables three times, and by the end of his third workshop, I remember he spoke very movingly and as he looked out over the fields at the trees he said, ‘When the fog clears from my head, it’s the beauty I see.’”

“I remember feeling like we’d made a real breakthrough with him through the horses.”

But it’s not just people facing trauma who find a breakthrough.

“Often with our corporate workshops, we’ll meet people in leadership roles who don’t see themselves as leaders,” says June. “They’ve been great at their jobs and been promoted into this position and aren’t necessarily comfortable with the idea.”

“However, over the course of



the workshop, they come to understand that leadership is about so much more than just telling people what to do.

“It’s about collaboration and inspiring people, building a team of people that will choose to follow you and they realise through the way they are with the horses that they do have all those qualities. That’s always great to see.”

Working with horses is a huge de-stresser, says June.

For example, you don’t have time to mull over your problems or dwell on your worries when you’re with a horse.

She adds: “For people who come to Horses for People with either trauma or to build confidence and leadership qualities, we focus a lot on self-esteem and learning to manage our emotions, figuring out how to dial our assertiveness up and down appropriately without resorting to aggression.”

“All these things are huge-

ation and leave it there rather than ruminating on problems or holding on to any animosities, let things go and go back to grazing.”

“Another aspect of working with horses that has become increasingly important through the course of my career has been the importance of establishing clear boundaries – something that horses are very good at marking out.”

“The higher in business you go, the more you realise that the problems you encounter are often behavioural, and having clear boundaries is crucial in making business work on your own terms.”

For those interested in getting involved in a workshop, clients and corporates should know that they’ll learn a lot about themselves and how other people see them, and they’ll get even better at being themselves.

“While there’s lots of work with the horses, there’s no horse riding involved,” says June.

“And if people are a bit nervous around horses, that’s nothing to worry about.”

“In fact, it’s those people who tend to get even better results and an extra dose of confidence. It’s also important for people to understand that this isn’t counselling, it’s coaching.”

“I’m not involved with people’s pasts or anything that has happened to them before they

come to Ballygraffan Stables.

“My job is to pick up on any insights I can during the workshops.”

“I support them with that and the process can be transformative in learning practical techniques to improve their confidence, their ability to cope in challenging situations and to thrive in their personal and professional lives.”

While workshops can bring up many issues, June says it’s important for her to keep her emotions in check.

“I take a step back from the emotional things going on and remember that I’ve got a job to do, which is to empower people into realising they can do something about where they are in life, whether that’s professionally as part of their team, or in their personal lives,” she says.

“They can take control – of a powerful animal like a horse and of the situations they visit every day – and make positive things happen for themselves.”

“I believe the first step is learning to respond calmly in challenging situations and to manage our emotions.”

“With all that comes confidence and self-belief – qualities that stand us in good stead in every aspect of our lives.”

For more information about workshops at Horses for People and to book, visit horsesforpeople.co.uk