

# Fall City NEIGHBORS

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## A New Kind of Farm in Town

By Allyson Valentine Schrier

Just a few blocks off 324<sup>th</sup>, at Madison Grove Farm, you'll find farmers Marla and Darin McNary busily pursuing their passion. Mending fences, moving piles of manure, mowing—and most of all, doling out buckets of kind words and compassion. Their farm isn't about growing livestock or produce. Instead, it's about providing a safe place for disadvantaged kids to grow a new sense of confidence and accomplishment through hands-on work with horses.

Like the kids who come to Madison Grove, the horses are mostly from less than ideal situations. Through neglect or abuse they have developed issues with nutrition, behavior and trust. At the farm kids learn how to have positive, successful relationships with horses and the results are profound—for the kids as well as the horses.

As much as she insists that it's all about the kids, it's Marla's story that started it all. She was just fifteen-years-old when her older sister was tragically killed. The only place Marla found solace was working with horses. Riding, grooming, cleaning stalls--simply being around horses rebuilt her broken spirit and gave her a sense of hope and



Madison Grove Farm Front



Learning grooming techniques



Youth mentor, Abbi & student

purpose. Eventually she found work at a pediatric therapeutic riding program. There, she witnessed physically disadvantaged kids making the same kind of connection with horses that had saved her following the loss of her sister. Watching kids find a renewed sense of self and capability, Marla knew—I'm supposed to be doing this.

Then she stumbled upon the work of Kim Meeder, founder of Crystal Peaks Youth Ranch in Central Oregon. Meeder has been recognized at the national level for the profound work she has done helping troubled and at-risk youth by allowing them to love, and be loved by, horses. In her book, **Hope Rising**, Meeder sums up the work that she does in this description of her ranch: “[It’s]broken property planted with more than three-hundred broken trees and shrubs, filled with a herd of broken horses—all to love back to life thousands of broken children.”

Located on nine acres of leased and loaned land, Madison Grove is a non-profit organization that provides all its services free of charge. Much of what is here has been donated. The fencing, the old red farm vehicle called the mule, and many of the horses. Marla is the first to admit that the farm could never succeed without the help of the kids who ride here, and the dedication of over 10 regular volunteers. These volunteers assist wherever they're needed around the farm, and help Marla teach “natural horsemanship”, which is about creating a relationship in which the horse wants to please, and does what you want it to do rather than needing to be forced.

In a short time since the Farm opened its doors, it has made dramatic changes in the lives of kids from in and around the Valley. Kids suffering from grief, depression, anxiety and more have discovered the same

sense of renewed hope that fifteen-year-old Marla found through her work with horses. Interested in being a volunteer? Know a kid who'd benefit from Madison Grove's special brand of healing? The folks at Madison Grove are happy to chat in phone, via email, or in person.



Miss Marla during a child session

Madison Grove Farm • 3807 324th Ave SE • Fall City, WA 98024  
[info@madisongrovesfarm.org](mailto:info@madisongrovesfarm.org) (425) 445-8623  
[www.madisongrovesfarm.org](http://www.madisongrovesfarm.org)