

Where Does Positivity Come From - 2017 Service Trip

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8 AM on a Saturday morning, trailing along with the rest of the United States Pony Club National Youth Board members, I was shuffled into a car. As we pulled into Compton, CA I could feel the nerves running high throughout all the passengers, as the unexpected was slowly materializing in front of us. But just as initial conclusions were being drawn, a horse and man in a cowboy hat came striding towards us down the paved street, a thundering train flying past on the train tracks only blocks behind them.

I've seen both: barns surrounded by concrete with a single arena being the only point of exercise, and barns surrounded by hundreds of thousands of acres. But I've never seen a barn so perfectly tucked behind a row of houses. The Compton Junior Posse is located on property made up of what appears to be several backyards put together. The small farm is centered around an arena with pipe stalls attached to half of the arena fence and the other half surrounded by a hay barn and viewing area with bleachers and tables. The Posse was started in 1988 by a few women in the area who had a single backyard and wanted to ride together. They attracted interest from mothers who wanted their kids to ride. They pride themselves on safety, having no major accidents or injuries directly related to the horses.

Walking in, the sight looked all too familiar: kids and horses and instructors. The kids were in a circle with an instructor leading them in a series of exercises and, despite several complaints that they could've been in bed watching Netflix, the atmosphere was full of joy. The National Youth Board joined in as they arrived, only to jump into a stretch circle where everyone was asked to give the group a quick exercise to do. The whole time the instructor bubbled over with enough positivity to fill a room, which only multiplied in the boundless outdoors that sunny morning. A glance over at my fellow members, whose outward enthusiasm helped stifle any disdain for the early morning exercises themselves, setting the tone for the morning. These kids were ready to participate, to learn, to absorb, to listen; these kids were Pony Clubbers (should be Pony Club members) in their own rights.

We split our National Youth Board members into two groups, one teaching unmounted and one assisting with mounted lessons. The kids were split into groups of four to five kids each, rotating between one riding lesson and unmounted lessons. Our National Youth Board provided the instruction for both the mounted and unmounted lessons for the day as well as acting as leaders and spotters for the horses.

The Posse starts all their kids bareback with one horse leader and one spotter in order for them to find their balance quickly while not being in danger of falling off. Their method proved to work as we watched some of the kids posting and changing their diagonal

bareback without even blinking. The older kids were fitted in full tack and had no runners, however they were no less impressive. Their seats and hands illustrated the solid foundation they'd been brought up with. They were respectful and hardworking students, taking our National Youth Board members' advice and suggestions to heart.

Our unmounted lessons were met with just as much enthusiasm; their knowledge of colors and breeds and horse parts were right on par. But more impressive was their hunger for the knowledge; they wanted to know more and took in everything we taught them exuberantly.

As the day went on and we got to know the kids better, we only fell more in love with their personalities and dedication. Before we left we gave them bags of pony club goodies and gave the parents and instructors ways to feasibly bring Pony Club to their group. There was a boy in the oldest group who had come from a rough home life, but watching him ride you would never even think about that. His hands were light on the horse's mouth and his leg solid. We were told by one of his instructors that when asked about his dream career, he wanted to be a dressage rider.

I know Pony Club has given me the ability to do many things; be respectful, be a leader, be confident, show sportsmanship. But there are underlying gifts from Pony Club that I hadn't seen until I spent the day with these kids: a sense of positivity and excitement from the atmosphere; the energy and hunger to learn information that jumped out at me; senses and moods I had associated with Pony Club and horses; senses and moods the Compton Junior Posse was able to create just as well. To be able to contribute to the positivity and excitement, to feed the energy and hunger, to be part of the entire atmosphere was incredible.

It wasn't just easy to forget that we were in a backyard in what is known to be a rough neighborhood, it was forgotten. We were with kids that loved horses, that loved learning, and that loved to be happy. They may not have the same resources our clubs at home have or the same education or materials, but they wanted the same things and responded in the same way. It was nothing less than a magical experience, and I came away wanting to do so much more for them, to allow those kids to learn everything we can in our own clubs. And while I can't give them everything; I know I'll remember how clearly our positivity, the positivity of their instructors, and the positivity of the volunteers affected the Compton Junior Posse kids throughout the day.

Positivity can come from anyone and be created anywhere, whether it be the kids who have found their escape in horses because of their home situations or the kids who are trying to escape bullies or just the everyday struggles of life. I'm so grateful for the experience of getting to know the Compton Junior Posse and what their impact has on their community.