

Engage360 Episode 140 | Healing, Hope, and Horses; Chaplain Gwen Hanna, Dr. Mark Danielson

[00:00:16] **Dr. Eva Bleeker:** Friends, it's my pleasure to welcome you to this episode of Engage360, which is Denver Seminary's podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Eva Bleeker. I am Chair and Assistant Professor for Chaplaincy and Pastoral Care programs here at the school. And this is a fun part of my job that I get to do. I hope that you enjoy hearing this conversation between myself and two colleagues who are involved in a compelling and unique form of ministry, and I'll let you explain the ways that your settings are unique.

Our guests for today are Chaplain Gwen Hanna and Dr. Mark Danielson. They are both connected to Denver Seminary in their own ways. And they're both involved in ministry that has horses at the center in some way. So, thank you both so much for being here. Chaplain Gwen, I might start with you, and see if you will tell us a little bit about how you're connected to the school and the big picture of what you do in your work.

[00:01:23] **Gwen Hanna:** Great. Well, thanks for having me. It's a privilege to be here. I'm connected because I graduated in 2017 with my master's in counseling ministries. And then I completed my CPE, one unit, doing chaplaincy at a ranch where I'd been affiliated and also in elder care. Where I've landed for the long haul is I'm a chaplain at a ranch called Caring for Kids here in south of Denver.

And that the ranch serves those with special needs. Hippotherapy is the name of what the modern of service is. So, kids come, and I say kids, but our clients come, a bunch of them are also adults. They get on the horseback, the leader of that session is either an occupational therapist or a physical therapist, and they do the therapy on horseback.

My particular role is I get to be outside the gate with whomever is outside the gate, and that can be a parent, it can be a caregiver that is bringing the client, it could be a sibling, it could be one of our volunteers and staff who's having whatever kind of day they're having. And as chaplain, I just get to come in and walk alongside them and whatever that means.

In my particular case, that could mean introducing them to baby chicks, feeding a pig, I've had times when I have clients and I do get a horse out and we do some therapeutic things, brushing and groundwork and things like that, that are helpful for whatever that situation is. So, sometimes I am, like, I've been given the name "Worst Case Scenario."

So, in the worst-case scenario, Gwen can meet the need of whatever's going on. So as chaplain, I just get to serve, love, watch what God does in the lives of a wide variety of people. It's not a Christian facility, so to speak, but we watch God do his work there all the time.

[00:03:29] **Dr. Eva Bleeker:** So exciting to hear about that, Gwen. And Dr. Danielson, I'll call you Mark from here on out, but tell us, tell us a little bit about your connection to Denver Seminary and the kind of work that you're doing with horses in your context.

[00:03:45] **Dr. Mark Danielson:** Sure. Again, thank you for allowing me to be here today. It's a real joy to be able to come here and just to share about what God is doing. And my connection to Denver Seminary is, it's been about three years ago, I was asked to be a research advisor in the Doctor of Ministry program. And so, connecting with doctoral students and helping them in their research phases of their projects.

And so that's my connection there. And then, most recently in this past semester, I co-taught, with Dr. Ward, a class in research methodologies. And so, I love what God is doing in Denver and at Denver seminary. And it's just a joy. It's been a joy to work with them for the last three years.

So, my connection to horses, I'm the Executive Director of Grace Children's Home in Henderson, Nebraska. And it's long been a residential facility for children in out-of-home care. Because of paradigm shifts in federal laws and that sort of thing, Grace Children's Home no longer does residential care, but they do foster care.

So, we are a child-placing agency in the state of Nebraska. Along with that, we have developed a real interest in helping children who have experienced traumatic early childhood abuse and neglect and being able to find ways to promote healing and wellbeing in the kids. And so about five years ago, just shortly after I came here, we started working with horses and children.

And that really grew out of our own experience. My wife and I, with our daughter, we have an adopted daughter, from foster care, eight years ago, and who had five mental health diagnoses and had experienced profound and traumatic abuse and neglect. And so, we began using horses as a way of building connection and trust.

We saw such a dramatic change in her that we began applying that to other children as well. And so that's how we got to the point. This year we'll do about 600 equine therapy sessions with children.

[00:06:14] **Dr. Eva Bleeker:** Thank you.

[00:06:16] **Dr. Mark Danielson:** I have seven this afternoon.

[00:06:18] **Dr. Eva Bleeker:** Seven. How wonderful. Thank you. And thanks for touching a little bit, Mark, on how your own family story brought you to where you are working with horses. And Gwen, I know that there's some commonality there with your story too. I wonder if you might share what circumstances, what part of your narrative, led you to being the chaplain at the gate of the therapy ranch.

[00:06:44] **Gwen Hanna:** Yeah. Well, God has been a companion and partner through some pretty difficult years in life. I've got two daughters in their twenties now. And when they were young, you know, about 20 years ago, our lives blew up. My ex-husband was removed from our home for abusing them. We went through that trauma, lots of counseling, lots of hard work to try to find our equilibrium after that.

I mean, I was in ministry, you know, there's all kinds of pieces of that that made it extremely traumatic. Part of what happened though is, my oldest daughter just loved horses. And as I prayed over her one night, God kept bringing to mind a woman that I knew that did equine assisted psychotherapy, EAP, using the horses to help kids. I talked with her, we found a therapist, and my kids did that for a couple of years, and then they did four and a half years of therapeutic writing lessons where, my oldest daughter doesn't mind if I tell the story.

When we started when she was in high school, she was so still traumatized that even ordering her own McDonald's, she couldn't do it. By the end of her senior year, because of all those years working

with horses, she actually delivered a chapel speech to her entire high school, using the themes of what God taught her through horses.

And I think. Those years where I was the mom outside the gate watching my kids find the healing through what horses could do gave me the desire. I've been in nonprofit ministry my entire career, I was in missions things before, but when God started moving in me to open the door to say, what do you want to do?

I just want to be where you, God, horses, and people are finding their way to healing. And through a number of circumstances, I landed here at Caring for Kids. I have my own nonprofit ministry where I raise my own funds so I can be a chaplain for whatever circumstances there. And God has just shown great favor.

I'm humbled by all the ways He's opened doors and all the ways He's used so many of those life experiences as a chaplain to just be ready to empathize and be with people in their life stories.

[00:09:09] **Dr. Eva Bleeker:** I want to come back to some of those stories in a moment, but Mark, I want to ask you, for people who maybe have never been around horses, and don't know what Gwen means when she uses the phrase, "what horses can do," how might you describe for our listeners why horses are such a central part of what you're doing at Grace Children's Home?

[00:09:39] **Dr. Mark Danielson:** You know, it's really, really simple in some ways, and it's really complex in other ways. But the simple look of this is that the horse is like a mirror. The horse is reflective, being a prey animal. They're reflective, and they're always hyper-vigilant, and they have a lot of situational awareness.

And so, they're reflecting the things that they see around them and experience around them. And oftentimes as people, you know, I could come here today and I could put on a show and fool you, or anybody. And the thing is, that doesn't happen in the arena. The horse picks that up right away.

And they reflect that back. And so, as you gain an understanding of being around horses, it's kind of like looking into a mirror that's really, really honest. It doesn't allow you to lie, and the horse will respond. But horses also desire connection. And that connection and attachment is something that's innate with a horse.

And so that helps children who have experienced trauma, or really anybody, you know, building a connection, learning how to build a connection based on trust and based on respect, based on proximity, based on your mannerisms and all of those things. There are so many things that come into play and horses are consistent about that.

Really equine therapy is a guided interaction with a child, between a child and an animal that wants to attach and is reflective. And yet there's this mysterious side where God invites us into this little place in the slice of history where he chooses to work.

And Gwen alluded to that, like anything else that comes up, you know, and those are just, they're such teachable times and places when you're with an animal that's 1,000 pounds or 1,200 pounds, and with a child.

[00:11:42] **Dr. Eva Bleeker:** So profound the things that you're saying about mirroring and connection and Gwen, as Mark was talking, I could see you resonating with what he was saying. How might you complete the question about what horses can do? What makes ministry with them so unique?

[00:12:01] **Gwen Hanna:** I think in our context, horses do that emotionally, but they can also do that physically. You know, when we take a child out of a wheelchair and put them on the back of a horse, the movement of the horse gives their body what their body can't do. So, in addition to the emotional things, but, when you're working with herd animals, which he's talking about the attachment and the relationship, and you're talking about prey animals, who always live at high alert.

So, when you're working with trauma situations, or just people who've gone through so much, and they're on high alert, the horse is like that too. And learning how to respond to that mirror. Oh, what I'm doing or how I'm behaving is triggering something in him, how do I change me in order to have a safe relationship where he sees me as a safe leader, one who's going to take that horse in good places and that can be trusted.

And as you know, as we learn that, and we have our special needs, they come with emotional special needs, physical special needs, all of that is in the mix. Learning how to take a child on the autism spectrum and learning how to read the signals that are nonverbal, and turning that back around and helping them to realize, how do I communicate in the same way?

They're just beautiful things on all kinds of levels and God has made a horse in an amazing way that opens doors, opens ways of communication and of healing.

[00:13:37] **Dr. Eva Bleeker:** I'm imagining that our listeners are feeling curiosity about what the day-to-day rhythms are at the places where you work. Not that there's ever something that we could call a "typical" or a "normal" day when we are in the helping professions, we have to be ready for things to change at all times.

But I wonder if you could talk in general about what a more normal-than-not-normal day is at your places of work, and either of you can start whenever you're ready.

[00:14:14] **Dr. Mark Danielson:** Go ahead, Gwen.

[00:14:15] **Gwen Hanna:** Okay. As chaplain, I get up in the morning, and one of the things that I love the most about what I do is God always has a surprise for me every day. And I don't know what that will be. You get up looking for the thing that, at the end of the day, what am I going to be full of gratitude for?

I put on my chaplain badge and my boots, and I drive my way there praying for whatever is coming. And we have anywhere from, on a very short day, maybe five clients. On a longer day, we can do up to nine or ten clients, half an hour sessions. Typically, it's, it's one client at a time.

Part of my responsibility is also to our staff. So, we have a horse leader, a volunteer or two, plus the therapists that are there, so there's people that are coming with their things, whatever their stuff is. You come in, try to center ourselves, and then the clients and their families come, and you know,

perhaps they've had a great day, and they're ready to ride, and perhaps it's going to take the chaplain to coax them out of the car gently, you know, with, with whatever I can offer them, you know, whatever is the thing that is motivating, and then they get on their horse and they do their session. The favorite thing for most all of them is the giggle trot.

If they get a chance to go a little fast for a little while, it always brings a giggle on almost all of them. You'd think they'd be afraid, but that movement and that reality of that power and that normalness for many of our kids is just a beautiful thing. But it can include all kinds of things. If there's a little sibling, I've got some of the littles that are two to five before they're in school.

They get dragged from therapy to therapy to therapy. And for their sibling. And the ranch, I tried to make it a place. One of my littles, when she was about three, said to her mom, when she got out of the car, "Mom, Miss Teresa is here for my brother, and Miss Gwen is here for me." And just owned that time, and we spend time, play together, and I walked that little one right into full time school, but also through the almost-divorce of her parents.

Took her out for a special coffee date, and we just build relationships. But it can also be sitting with, you know, a father for multiple years, just going through his life and hearing how it's going, whether with the special needs son or life outside, he had another stepson who was really struggling through all kinds of things, and just being a presence and a listening ear and a receiving place for whatever they need to bring.

And I've watched God turn lives around and meet them there, even to the point of when dad was baptized this weekend. And I just got to be in the celebration and watch God change a whole family. So, it's just a beautiful thing. It's hard to put it, encapsulate it, but I go for the day. I see what God does.

And it, you know, I could be weeding the yard for a long time next to somebody. And I could be having the most in-depth conversation that I never saw coming. So, it's just being right there where God's doing his thing and just joining in.

[00:17:34] **Dr. Eva Bleeker:** Gwen, I just want to appreciate the expansiveness of the circle of your care, how you see everyone as a potential recipient of your ministry, not just the identified patient, so-to-speak, or the person who's there to receive a horseback therapy session, but that everyone counts, and that you have eyes to see the needs of the whole family unit and people who are part of that story who may not ever set foot on the property of the ranch.

[00:18:03] **Gwen Hanna:** Mm-hm.

[00:18:03] **Dr. Eva Bleeker:** And just your willingness to see pulling weeds and feeding the pigs as part of the work of the Lord. Mark, how might you describe for us what a mostly normal day is at your place of work?

[00:18:21] **Dr. Mark Danielson:** Yeah, first of all, I just want to express appreciation for what Gwen had said, because with children, really a huge part of the equation and helping them heal is helping parents learn the narrative about trauma, and not exacerbate that, but learn to cooperate with the process going on.

And so, you know, visiting with the parents while we're having equine therapy sessions, and we invite our parents and even encourage them to be there. And there will even be times where we'll put the parents on horseback as well and let them interact with a horse and the children, and we're just finding a lot of pleasure in that too.

I tell people that something magical happens, but it's usually not something that we orchestrate ourselves. We can put children on a horse. We are not an equine assisted psychotherapy organization. We do equine therapy and learning. And so, a little distinguishment.

However, most of our referrals come from a licensed psychotherapist, for sending them our way for equine therapy because she sees the benefit in it and has seen a number of young kids. So, our children will run the autism spectrum, from nonverbal and literally impossible to get a helmet on them, to children who are high-functioning and really on the way out of really needing that ongoing therapeutic intervention.

So, we, but, but, it, for the most part, our sessions are going to be putting a child on a horse, and we have four staff that work with the clients, and so we have an indoor arena and an outdoor arena, so we have the choices for weather options. But we'll have patterns and different things, obstacles set up in the arena.

And children are given an ability to navigate a horse through those things in some cases. And so, they're learning about cooperation, about communication, about balance, and trust, and control, and yielding, and then again there's that cadence or that somatic presence of the animal too, the feeling the animal move beneath you.

We're always bringing awareness to that. I'll be asking the young people, "Can you feel the horse move? What do you, how do you feel? Do you feel your feet in the stirrups?" There'll be times we'll have them raise their hands left and right in cadence with the horse.

We're bringing that rhythm, that bipedal motion. That's really good for left brain, right brain connections. And we'll do things that stimulate balance, like not holding on to the saddle when they're comfortable just holding on to the reins with one hand. And letting their other hand maybe go straight out to the side, or even up above.

And then focusing on that balance. Of course, we have side-walkers with them, and they're helmeted, so we have those things there. But it's about learning and building trust and regulation and connecting with their environment. Just having a situational awareness.

What are you seeing? What are you feeling? What do you smell? It's incredible. And getting them to use those senses while they're on the horse. It's interesting though, we're finding that, for children from a trauma background, fear is a huge obstacle. Fear hinders self-regulation, communication, empathy, attachment, it hinders all that.

So, we have found that it's really true that perfect love casts out fear, and we can create a safe environment. Not only a safe environment, but one where they feel safe, where they can perceive that safety. When that happens, we see the fear drop down. And all of those other things, the attachment, the connection, the regulation, the attunement, all of those things rise.

And so, we're really just orchestrating what God has put in place, through the nature of what he's created. And taking this little moment and seizing that moment. We're choosing to enter into a moment that God has given us and inviting him into that presence as well, into that moment.

It's really nothing formulaic. It's almost a magical moment there. And I tell people this at the end of the day, it's also just fun. It's just fun. I was talking to a group of 22 teachers back in the end of February who asked me to come and speak about equine therapy, so I did. In the last picture, I have a picture of my daughter, who's now 18 and finally graduating high school. And she helps out with equine therapy. And she's standing next to this girl, and this girl is just beaming with a smile.

One of the teachers walks up. And she goes, is, I'll just use her name, is that Emma? And, because she had a helmet on, you know, and she was looking at the screen up in front of the room. And I go, yeah. And she started crying. This teacher started, just started weeping. And she says, she was in my special-ed class for four years, and I've never seen her smile.

[00:24:13] **Gwen Hanna:** Wow.

[00:24:14] **Dr. Mark Danielson:** And I, of course, you know.

[00:24:15] **Gwen Hanna:** Mm-hm.

[00:24:17] **Dr. Mark Danielson:** I about lost it then too, and even now, but just seeing the joy that radiates in the faces of the children who are learning how to trust, and finding moments of time where fear isn't controlling and dictating everything they're doing and thinking and feeling, so yeah, it's fun, just fun.

[00:24:38] **Gwen Hanna:** Fun. Mm-hm.

[00:24:40] **Dr. Eva Bleeker:** Something I appreciate as I'm listening to the two of you is how this type of ministry recognizes the whole personhood of the person receiving the care. You're talking literally about hands and feet and emotion and spirituality and faith. And it just seems so integrated in your places of work.

I'm imagining that our listeners, as they're hearing from you, and hear you talking about having fun doing things that are hard and things that are important, that a person might wonder, how do you get involved with something like this?

If a person were thinking, how could I do what Gwen does? How could I do what Mark does? What kind of steps might you recommend for them, big or small? A book to read, a program to enroll in, what kind of action steps might you offer?

[00:25:40] **Gwen Hanna:** Well, you said a book to read, one that I would recommend is *Hope Rising* by Kim Meeder. Lots of stories about broken kids finding their way with broken horses and finding their way together. Very powerful testimony. Steps I would recommend is, find a place to volunteer and go see what it's about.

Go visit and feel the magic, really, of what God is doing. We have people come in and without fail, it's a, wow, you guys really work so well together. This is a place of joy. This is a place of hope. And when you're in that kind of environment, I mean, just go and see it for yourself.

I mean, to do what I'm doing, I knew I wanted to be where God, horses, and people were working. I really didn't know when I entered seminary that I'd come out a chaplain. You know, the CPE was required of me. I did that. Halfway through my CPE, I went, oh, that's what I'm doing, right?

That's what this call is about. And I've watched it develop. So, chaplaincy is a great path if you want to go on the more formal path. I think mostly it's just become available. And put yourself in the places where God is doing His thing. Because we all come with our stuff. And I think we get in the environment.

And the grounding of it all, as Mark was talking, that's what I kept thinking, you know, it's like you feel your feet, you feel your body, you feel your sensations, you feel your emotions, you feel all that, and you do it in the present. And I think that's another gift that a horse facility brings, is you have got to be present, both to stay safe, but also because in the moment, you need to be right there.

And that is the most freeing way to live life. So, I think my invitation would be come be present with us and you'll find something different in your life.

[00:27:42] **Dr. Eva Bleeker:** Thank you for saying so. What would you say, Mark?

[00:27:45] **Dr. Mark Danielson:** You know, when you talked about presence, Gwen, that really resonated with me. In fact, on my notes, I have something written down that we talk about a lot here is "somatic presence." And which is really what she's referring to, being aware of your environment, and horses draw you into that environment naturally.

When you're touching a horse and feeling a horse and smelling a horse or sitting on a horse or like a horse. You know, at the end of a lesson, we always have a child come around and address the horse, and reward the horse with appropriate touch, and without fail, every one of our horses will lower their head down into a very vulnerable position for a prey animal to lower that head, and place that head close to the heart, and there is so much healing that takes place. When that child realizes, they can come there to the therapy session having a horrible day.

But at that moment when it happens, it's amazing to see how the child responds to that horse. And so, I would say the same thing. If you want to find ways to get involved or this, put a mark on Henderson, Nebraska and drive here. And just to learn more about it, and we have people that are wanting to volunteer here and that do and help us out, and some say, I just want to come and scoop stalls.

And just to be able to be in the presence of those animals and to be able to be near them. And so just being involved and learning and watching and what happens. Our daughter is headed to undergraduate school this year for a counseling major at the undergraduate level and hopes to work in the equine facility, and maybe even take some classes at a neighboring Kansas State University in equine science and to learn more about it.

And she's got eight years of consistent riding already. So, there's steps that way as well. She anticipates becoming involved in equine therapy after pursuing a bachelor's and master's degree. So, we'll see what God does.

[00:30:18] **Dr. Eva Bleeker:** It's nourishing almost to hear those kinds of stories from the two of you. And before we close out today, I wonder if, in your preparation for joining us today, if there was something you were hoping I would ask, or a way that you might be able to say something that you haven't had the chance to say yet, something that feels really important to include today.

[00:30:44] **Dr. Mark Danielson:** Yeah, I'm happy to always talk about horses because seeing and watching the interaction between a child and a horse has been so rewarding. Probably never more personal than in our own experience with our daughter who found profound healing by God's grace and through early childhood trauma and abandonment.

We were her 10th placement, and you can only imagine the rejection and all of that that goes along with it. She is in such a healthy place and such a vibrant, passionate soul for Christ, and to be able to say that it's every week I get calls from parents and they're desperate. They're like, would you have a place?

Can you just take my child? I can't handle him anymore. And I feel the desperation. I hear that desperation. Maybe the child was adopted. Maybe the child experienced trauma and trauma behaviors are so, so hard. They're very hard to work through. But I can say this, that God has used, in my experience, horses in some amazing ways to bring true, legitimate healing and connection and attunement and regulation and joy and peace.

There is a redemptive presence when a child and a horse come together. And, I just want to say this, that in places where there is no hope, we've seen hope rise. And man, that's a beautiful thing. One of our barns is called Hooves of Hope. And the hooves of a horse really do bring hope. Unless they step on your foot.

[00:32:37] **Gwen Hanna:** Good point. Yes.

[00:32:41] **Dr. Eva Bleeker:** What else is important for you to say, Gwen?

[00:32:44] **Gwen Hanna:** Just echoing that, you know, the families that I work with, they have kids who are medically fragile, kids who are behaviorally so challenging. If you're one of those out there and you don't know where else to turn, look for something like this. Look for it. I've seen moms the very first time we put their child down and they see their child look sort of "normal," and they're on a horse and they're riding, and they would never think that their child would have an opportunity like that.

And I'd say look for something outside the box, outside of your typical therapies, outside of those things, and find an open way. And let God do what He can do.

And we're both here to testify that horses are one of God's amazing gifts to all of us. Just being in the space, like you said, scooping the poop, is one of the most favorite activities, and that's what brings most of our volunteers first. They just want to be in the spaces, and then we all get to work with each other toward the common goal of bringing hope, healing, laughter, joy, strength.

All of that comes out of our times together. And I've seen God just do amazing things, and I'm just so privileged to be able to do what I do. And, yeah, come find us!

[00:34:19] **Dr. Eva Bleeker:** I think people are going to want to come find both of you. And so, I just want to give gratitude to you, both of you, our guests today, Chaplain Gwen Hanna and Dr. Mark Danielson, for sharing with us today with great faith and wisdom, and also with vulnerability and heart and compassion for the people that you serve.

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