



MAKING A DIFFERENCE

The Aspen Effect

Helping Our Youth With Mental Crisis and Substance Use Disorder

EACH MONTH, THE LEE TEAM uses this space to shine the spotlight on a nonprofit organization that's making our community a better place to be in with the hope of generating support from the people who live here. We are proud to highlight The Aspen Effect this month.

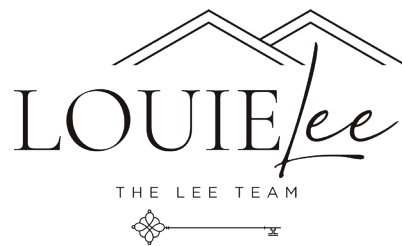
At a 117-acre ranch in Sedalia, The Aspen Effect is tackling some of the biggest problems facing Colorado youth today: mental health crises and substance use disorder.

Operating out of the Happy Dog Ranch horse sanctuary, the nonprofit is entering a major expansion phase this year, adding new programs for parents and a better funding model to keep its services free for families.

The Aspen Effect is grateful to be supported by a \$100,000 grant from the Douglas County Opioid Abatement Council, a \$113,000 matching grant from Douglas County, and the generosity of individual donors.

"Last year really highlighted how important sustainable funding is for this work," said Jerry Van Leuven, founder and executive director of The Aspen Effect. "We worked closely with the county and our supporters to make sure these programs could continue."

To build long-term stability, the organization has launched The Aspen Root Guild. It costs about \$1,000 a day to operate the ranch, and the Guild invites supporters to pledge a day, a week, or even a month over five years. This approach allows the team to focus more on serving youth with consistency and care.



Making a Difference!

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While the setting is scenic, with over 70 horses, goats, alpaca, cows, chickens, ducks, and a pig named Charlotte, the work itself is practical and intentional. The organization's flagship Ranch Mentor Club pairs youth with adult mentors for 12-week cycles.

The mentors aren't therapists or authority figures. They are everyday people from the community who receive training, pass background checks, and show up consistently as a trusted adult presence.

The Aspen Effect is currently seeking more volunteers and board members, especially males, to join the team. No ranch or therapeutic experience is required, just a half day of training, a background check, and a willingness to show up.

"The work is simple," Van Leuven said. "We get kids out of their heads. We turn the phones off. We give them something real to do and connect them with animals and adults who care."

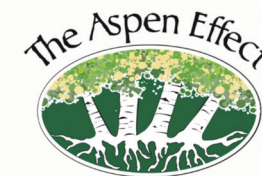
Whether it is sweeping out a barn, repairing a fence, or blending goat popsicles for rescue animals, the focus is on service, grounding, and connection.

"We're not there to fix kids or lecture them," Van Leuven said. "We're there to be present. Honestly, the animals do most of the teaching."

But the work is not only about kids. The Aspen Effect recognizes that when a child is struggling, parents are struggling too. To address this, the organization is launching Ranch Resilience Camps, held one Saturday each month from June through September for both youth and parents. The camps bring families to the ranch for a day of experiential learning. Parents and youth spend part of the day separately to allow for honest conversation and vulnerability, then come back together for meaningful shared moments. The goal is to give parents the same resilience tools, being grounded, connected, protected, and nurtured, that their children are learning.

Despite the tranquil environment, Van Leuven is quick to point out that the need is urgent. Even in wealthier areas like Douglas County, youth are struggling with isolation and digital bullying. "There's this idea that kids in our community are doing fine, and that just isn't true," Van Leuven said. "They're carrying the world in their pocket. When phones go into bedrooms, the pressure and the bullying go with them. What we offer here is space to breathe, heal, and rise."

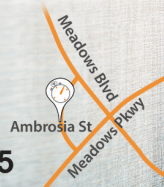
Please visit our website at www.TheAspenEffect.org and consider donating to this worthy cause! Thank you in advance!



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