



Wellness in the Land of Spirit Horses

Meet the carriers of story and healing at Madahoki Farm

By Melody Wren

We were welcomed to Madahoki Farm in Ottawa's greenbelt with song. Makhena, our Abitibiwinni First Nation Cultural Ambassador, greeted us in a northern style of singing, a form without words, yet resonant with intention, spirit and warmth. She closed her eyes and confidently sang a melody that seemed to embody the land itself, inviting us to listen with more than our ears. So beautiful and calming, it moved me to tears. It was both an introduction to and a reminder that in this place, wellness is woven through sound, story and relationships.

Just beyond the sound of Makhena's voice, in the green fields of the farm, twelve rare Ojibwe Spirit Horses wait, living symbols of resilience and healing whose presence anchors the teachings we are about to receive.

The Spirit Horses of Madahoki

At Madahoki Farm, wellness is about connection—to land, to ancestors, to culture and to animals who have lived here since time immemorial. Among the farm's goats, sheep, pigs and chickens live the Ojibwe Spirit Horses, the last of their kind in Canada. These small, resilient ponies once roamed freely across Turtle Island, living in harmony with the people of the land. Today, their presence here is both a cultural revival and a wellness practice. They remind us of balance, humility and reciprocity, the same values that guide Indigenous ways of life. These features, along with their endurance and gentleness, make them living testaments to survival.

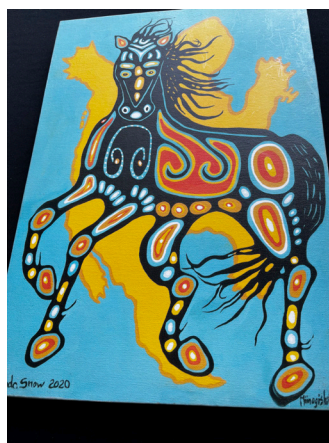
A rare blend of Ojibwe and Mustang lineage, these horses carry the wild beauty of the Mustang with tiger-striped legs, a strong dorsal line and a swooped back, tempered by the gentle, resilient spirit of the Ojibwe. It's their temperament that truly sets them apart. They move with a quiet awareness, leaning into your presence, offering a grounding strength and a comforting connection. In a single glance or gentle nuzzle, they communicate patience, trust and the exact support you didn't realize you needed.

Wellness through relationships

In Indigenous tradition, Spirit Horses are not broken or dominated. Instead, people and horses form a relationship based on respect and listening. At Madahoki, this philosophy is embodied in Equine-Assisted Learning workshops, where the horses help youth and adults release emotions. Sensitive to human energy, they reflect what people carry within; calming beside a joyful person, restless beside someone anxious. Their yawns, stamps, or quiet companionship are not random gestures, but signs of empathy and release.

Stories painted in spirit

The cultural and spiritual significance of these horses comes vividly alive in the paintings of Rhonda Snow, whose work is shared at Madahoki Farm by Cultural Ambassador Belle Bailey, a member of the Pikwakanagan First Nation. Snow gathered oral histories from



Elders and knowledge keepers, transforming them into visual narratives that now inform visitors of the legacy of the horses.

Each canvas holds a lesson. Elders' Story reminds us that Spirit Horses have always been here on Turtle Island. Trail on Turtle Island shows them moving freely with no fences, symbolizing harmony with the land. Three Living in Harmony portrays the deep interconnection between humans, horses, water and food, a holistic wellness rooted in reciprocity.

Some stories tell of survival and resilience. In Young Girl in Blizzard, a Spirit Horse shelters a freezing Anishinaabe child, carrying her home through the storm. In Rescued from Wolves, a mare and her foal survive alongside a trapper, their partnership a symbol of trust and endurance. The Schoolhouse is perhaps the most haunting: Spirit Horses stamping and shuffling to hide the cries of children as RCMP came to take

them to residential schools. Here, the horses become protectors, their strength a shield against trauma. Together, these paintings teach that healing is not linear; it is cyclical, woven through story, land and relationship with all beings.

Culture and context

Madahoki Farm is a living classroom for Indigenous knowledge. Visitors learn about the "three sisters" crops: corn, beans and squash, which thrive when planted together, highlighting the power of

interdependence. They hear about tikinagans, or cradleboards, designed to keep infants safe while fostering awareness of the world around them. They see beadwork made with porcupine quills, learn how birchbark canoes float lightly on water and step inside a teepee or wigwam. Every lesson, like the stories of the Spirit Horses, connects back to the same principle: wellness through balance. To live well is to live in relationship with plants, with animals, with community and with the spirit of humility

A new vision for healing

For the Anishinaabe, and many other Indigenous nations, wellness cannot be separated from the land or the beings we share it with. The Spirit Horses embody that worldview: they are not possessions but companions, carrying stories of survival, protection and healing. At Madahoki Farm, visitors encounter these rare ponies not as exhibits, but as teachers. They walk quietly alongside you, reminding you that true wellness is found not in ownership, but in relationship.

As our visit draws to a close, I watch Belle closely communicate silently with one of the Spirit Horses. He lowers his head against her shoulder, and in that quiet moment the teaching becomes clear: wellness is not a practice we bear alone, but a circle of care shared between humans, animals and the land itself.