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## MAKING A DIFFERENCE

# Boys to Men

Roy Sanders uses a lifetime of cowboy skills to turn troubled city boys into self-reliant young men.



By Tim Keller

92

**O**ut on the northwest boundary of his 175 acres above Trinidad, Colorado, Roy Sanders and his boys are building a fence with reclaimed wood fence posts. The four boys, aged 16 to 18, haven't done this before, so Roy demonstrates each step along the way, beginning with hole digging. On the way out they stopped to turn an ancient downed tree into firewood. Roy has spent a half-century

steeped in the myriad skills it takes to keep a ranch going, but these are city boys just learning how to work.



Roy shares a laugh with his foster sons. "This is my life," he says. "This is what I do. This is my family."

Cowboys are known for raising cows. Roy Sanders raises boys. Through a quirk of fate 11 years ago, he transformed a vagabond life of cowboy camps and rodeo arenas into that of a single foster parent running a group home for wayward boys. It's proved a marriage made in heaven. Think *My Three Sons*



crossed with John Wayne's *The Cowboys*.

Roy was a troubled child himself, his divorced parents moving him back and forth between Oklahoma and Idaho, when his great-uncle Jack Hancock took him in to grow up on Hancock's 200,000-acre ranch in southern Arizona. Roy started the third grade in the two-room school at Wikieup. "I know what it feels like to be a boy living away from home," he says.

Most of what he teaches boys today was learned at his uncle's side. "He was the greatest person I've ever known, and the greatest influence on my life," Roy says. "He was an old-time cowboy born in 1885 on a west Texas ranch. He left home on horseback at 14 to start cowboying. Pancho Villa captured him along the border and took him south, eventually releasing him because of his age. He walked 50 miles north to New Mexico."

Hancock homesteaded in Arizona, growing his big cattle ranch. "He taught me pretty much everything I know," Roy says, "including his values and work ethic." After Roy graduated from Kingman High School in 1974, he began cowboying throughout the West, working on the cowboy crews of big ranches, including the MC and ZX in Oregon and the Sweetwater and Spanish ranches in Nevada.

"I've always liked horses that buck so I'd volunteer to ride the rough string," he says. For 18 years, he rode saddle broncs in rodeos across the West, dividing his years into thirds. "As soon as spring branding was over, I'd leave and go ride the rodeo circuit. In the fall, I'd guide hunters in the North Absaroka Wilderness outside Yellowstone. Come winter, I'd go back to work on a ranch, usually south, somewhere warmer like Nevada or Arizona."

In 1991, he moved to Colorado to run the 38,000-

acre Seven Lakes Ranch, near Trinidad, running 200 mother cows plus 1,500 yearlings in the summers. He had 14 horses and took in others to train.

1999 was a bad year. The ranch was sold, and his



photographs by Tim Keller

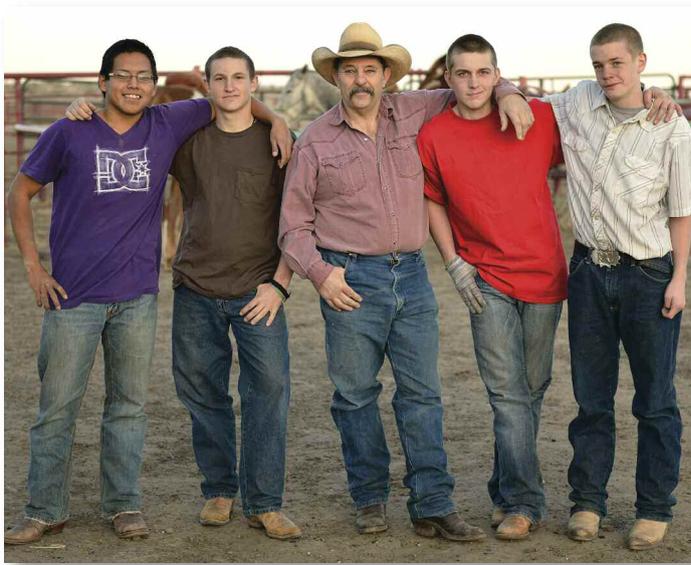
Roy has cowboeyed throughout the West, guided hunters, and competed on the rodeo circuit.

wife and kids moved away. Roy moved into Trinidad and took a job driving trucks in the gas fields.

"I'm an avid reader," he says. "One day, I couldn't find the *Denver Post*, so I was reading the *Pueblo Chieftain* when I saw an ad saying they needed foster parents. I thought, man, that would be great. I get along great with kids. I didn't think they'd take me because I wasn't married, but I passed the background checks and took in my first boy in 2002. They asked me if I'd take another one. The next thing I know, it turned into a full-time deal. I switched over from a foster home to a group home. If I'd found the Denver paper that day, this never would have happened."

When he took in his fourth boy in 2004, Colorado's Department of Human Services told Roy he'd have to get a bigger place. He bought raw land near





The family photo. Roy Sanders (center) with his four foster sons.

Hoehne, and he and his boys have been building a ranch ever since, the snow-capped Spanish Peaks majestic in the west, Fisher's Peak marking the way to New Mexico in the south.

"With my uncle, if we needed something done, we did it ourselves," Roy says. "I'm not a master of any trade, but I can do about anything. That's what I try to teach the boys. The main thing I teach them is how to work. The boys and I have done everything except set the house. We dug and installed the septic system. I taught them how to pour concrete and we framed up the footing for the house. We did the cistern for the water supply. We wired the garage for light. They learned how to weld and we built the barn and the corrals and arena." Today they're stacking firewood and building a fence.

Ranging in age from 14 to 18, the boys are in the legal custody of DHS. Some have been in trouble with the law and have probation officers. Some have been taken from bad home situations. To date, Roy's had 27 boys from all over Colorado, and all but one were city boys.

"When they get here, most have no idea how to work," he says. "They're all just used to hanging out, and playing video games. Here, we don't have video games. We concentrate on actual skills that they're going to be able to use for jobs."

One of the boys says, "Living here opened my eyes. Roy teaches you to be yourself. At home I tried to fit in too much. It led me to trouble."

"When the boys get here, they lack self-confidence," Roy explains. "They've been trying to be what they think everyone else wants them to be. I teach them to just be themselves. Be a good person, do your best, be honest, and then people will like you for who you are instead of what you think you need to be."

The boys stay with Roy until they graduate from Aguilar High School; many go on to college.

"I believe in an education," Roy says. "They can't get through life without it. That's huge to me. I push them to do their best in school. A lot of them come without that background of being in school and doing well. It takes them a while to realize, 'I can do this, I can go to school and I can get good grades.'"

Roy's longtime DHS supervisor, Janell Miller, says, "Roy is more caring and giving than anyone knows. He takes those boys and treats them as his own. He guides them and teaches them skills that will benefit them for a lifetime. He puts his own needs aside and he's there to assist the boys at any time. My only wish for Roy is that we could clone him and have every foster parent as wonderful as he is."

But Roy doesn't put his own life aside as much as Miller imagines. "This is my life," he says. "This is what I do. This is my family. This is as much the boys' home as mine." They go everywhere together, from grocery shopping to camping trips in the high mountains. Roy's Dodge crew cab seats six; his horse trailer has a living





As Roy's family grew, he needed a bigger home. He and the boys are at work building a ranch in southern Colorado.

quarters. "We've been to Elitch Gardens in Denver and the Albuquerque zoo. We went to Las Vegas, Nevada, to pick up a couple horses I bought."

Roy still trains horses and zigzags three states every year to compete in team roping. The boys learn to ride and rope. "I knew Ray Hunt in Nevada," Roy says, "and I learned a lot from him about training horses, working with their minds, making the things you want them to do easy and things they're doing wrong hard. Living here, these boys change their mindsets, too. They don't want to be in trouble anymore. That comes from giving them something to do."

In the arena on a recent Saturday afternoon, the boys trade off roping and driving a four-wheeler with a mechanical roping

calf. Roy shows the newest boy how to hold the rope. "We call each other brothers," one boy tells a visitor. "We look at Roy as our dad." They're earnest in learning to ride and rope, but as the sun sets over the Rockies and they walk their horses back to the barn, the camaraderie, easy smiles and rippling laughter are non-stop. One is graduating in May, going on to Trinidad State Junior College. He fancies buying his horse, Catfish, from Roy.

Roy laughs heartily, kidding the boy about his penniless state. They share the long walk to the house where they turn on the lights and clean up for dinner. The boys learn to cook and take turns making dinner. Along with the other chores and the laughter, it's all part of growing up here at Roy's place, here in Roy's family.



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