

Barnidge: When disabled kids saddle up at horse therapy center, miracles happen

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The children who arrive at the Xenophon Therapeutic Riding Center all have one thing in common. They suffer from some disability.

"We work with kids with attention deficit disorder, autism, physical disabilities, mental retardation, Down syndrome, almost anything," Executive Director Mari Parino said.

They come looking for the chance to ride a horse, but they receive a great deal more.

"When someone sits astride a horse, their hips move in the same way they would if they were walking," she said. "We see kids with spastic cerebral palsy arrive in wheelchairs, but after their muscles have been warmed up and experienced those neurological sensations they can walk out of the arena with assistance.

"We have autistic children who are unable to develop relationships with people because there is too much sensory input. Horses don't give off that input, so they're more willing to bond with a horse. We use that bond to help kids develop."

The center was founded by Judy Lazarus, who began with one horse and two students in a borrowed Martinez facility 19 years ago. It now operates on a 3-acre plot in Orinda, with a covered arena, where seven part-time instructors and more than 100 volunteers serve 48 students from Contra Costa and Alameda counties every week. More are on the waiting list.

Lazarus received a lifetime achievement award last week at the Contra Costa Council's Philanthropy Awards Breakfast, where she was applauded by a roomful of business and political leaders who came to celebrate the spirit of giving.

She first explored therapeutic riding as a way of reaching her autistic son. They both loved horses, which became their common ground. The more she saw of the results, the more enthused she became. "Physically, it strengthens weak muscles and improves balance," she said. "Psychologically, it helps self-esteem and confidence."

Parino, who originally joined Xenophon as an instructor, said there is a magic relationship between kids and horses. A "side-walker" accompanies each youngster to ensure safety, but the chemistry is between student and horse.

She recalled an autistic child, who never had spoken, uttering his first words at the center. After six weeks of using hand signals to indicate when he wanted his horse to move, one day he blurted out the command "walk on!"

"Everyone was in tears, his mom included," Parino said. "That experience unlocked the door, and from that point on the child was verbal. It was the horse that did it."

Another favorite story is of a wheelchair-using youngster who was so weak when he first arrived that after five minutes on horseback he slumped over in the saddle.

"By the end of the season," she said, "he could ride the entire 30 minutes and keep himself upright. At the end of the year, we had a horse show, and this little guy did a backward somersault off the horse."

Kids are encouraged to play games that build motor skills and participate in cognitive recognition drills. Volunteers and instructors engage them to develop their social skills.

Parino believes the whole process works because kids don't realize they're in therapy. They're weary of lengthy sessions with specialists at clinics, but horseback riding is fun.

She says every day is its own reward: "We get to see miracles when we go to work."

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