

Horses help special riders

People with handicaps often find joy in hippotherapy

By Laura Lane
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Stanford

A 21-year-old nag called Navaar transformed 14-year-old Kyle Strain's life. Kyle is a boy with autism. Navaar is white horse beyond his prime. Both are participants in a therapeutic riding program at Fleur de Lis Farm west of Bloomington.

PALS — People and Animal Learning Services — pairs physically and mentally impaired riders with gentle, specially trained horses for therapy and fun.

It's called hippotherapy, from the Greek word "hippos" for horse. The horse and its rhythmic movements are used as an integral part of physical and occupational therapy.

"It's therapy for the whole body," said Chris Holmes, a mother and pediatrician who volunteers as an instructor for the PALS program.

"Physical therapy usually hurts, let's face it. But I have never seen anything that motivates people like a horse. You can convince people to do things they might not otherwise do."

Hippotherapy relaxes spastic muscles, improves muscle tone, increases strength, helps joint and muscle function, elevates cardiovascular and pulmonary output and brings a confidence and self-esteem to riders. Memory is enhanced.

One of the first children Holmes worked with in hippotherapy was a girl who was blind, deaf, mute and profoundly retarded. She didn't want to be touched. Getting her to wear a helmet was a challenge. Convincing her to mount the horse was nearly impossible.

After a few lessons, the child would strap on her own helmet and drag Holmes into the ring. The struggle then became coaxing her off the horse when a lesson was over. "I'd never seen such a powerful transformation in a child," Holmes said. "She was close to flying when she was on the horse. She would make noises — sing — the whole time she was on the horse."

Participants often ride bareback so that riders can feel the moving muscles and warmth of the horse, she said. For many of the riders, the only time they feel free, and in control, is while on the back of a horse.

Teresa Steinsberger of Bloomington has seen the difference in Kyle Strain, her autistic son. Even as a toddler, being on a horse was the one way to bring a smile.

Kyle has been riding with the PALS program three years. He dons a helmet before each lesson and is helped by physical therapists who volunteer their time to be near him and work with him while he rides, one on each side.

"It's a way for him to show happiness, something that an autistic child sometimes can't do," Steinsberger said. "We can see it his eyes, in his smile, his gratitude for being able to ride a horse. There's feedback from him. It's good for him



Sophie Bortt smiles as she dismounts her horse in the arena at Fleur de Lis Farm west of Bloomington. Many people with handicaps ride the gentle horses as part of their therapy. Staff photo by Monty Howell

and good for us."

Kyle's vocabulary is limited and he rarely talks. After dismounting from a horse after a ride through an obstacle course at a PALS horsemanship show Nov. 10, his mother held his shoulders and looked into his eyes.

"Say, 'Navaar,' Kyle," she instructed. And he did. The word brought smiles to mother and son.

"The reward of the horse will cause him to do things he wouldn't usually do," she said. "Movements. Speaking. The horse is very potent medicine for Kyle. And it makes him smile, a nice thing for us to see."

Kristen McNeal is a respite care worker who used to bring Kyle to his PALS lessons. She didn't know much about horses, but immediately saw the benefits the Tuesday therapy brought to Kyle.

"I just liked the way he would get so excited about coming here," she said. "It was so much more fun than the other things we'd do. His best days were always when we came here to ride."

Now, she's a volunteer with the program and helps out during lessons.

Margie Walls said her 20-year-old son, Ben, who is autistic, used to shy away from horses at their farm. Since he started riding in the PALS program, he has a new attitude. "Now, he goes up to one old horse at the fence he used to be afraid of and wraps his arms around his neck for a hug," she said. "It's a big change."

Melinda Martin is 44. Her mother first enrolled her in a therapeutic riding program years ago. "I was afraid, then I wasn't," she said. "The movement of the horse makes me feel good. It helps with my balance and stuff."

Fern Bonchek is the woman behind PALS. She started the program in 1995 and now runs it at the farm and equestrian barn owned by family friends Larry and Donna Ferree.

PALS is one of 20 therapeutic riding programs in Indiana that belongs to the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association. There's one other area NARHA riding center, New Horizons Therapeutic Riding, at Rocky River Farm on Russell Road in Bloomington.

"I've ridden horses my whole entire life," Bonchek said. "It's always been my personal therapy and this is a way to help others by using horses."

The PALS program started with 12 riders and has grown to 21 children and adults, ranging in age from 3 to 55, with various disabilities that include autism, cerebral palsy and Down syndrome.

Lessons last 30 to 45 minutes and cost \$30. Steinsberger said her son's lessons are paid for through state grants.

"The horse is beneficial to increasing coordination and self-esteem," Bonchek said during a break in a PALS horse show Saturday at Fleur de Lis Farm. "It's really exciting to see the new riders starting out fresh. I can see the benefits right away."

She recalled a little boy who went from being scared and withdrawn to running into the barn shouting, "I'm here. Where's my horse Navaar?"

Eight horses are used in the program. Some have been donated and others are on loan. Bonchek may take three months to train a horse for its special job.

"They are older and gentler horses," she said. "This is their retirement. The horses really love the attention and they are well cared for. The work they do is important."

While it's difficult at first to convince some people with disabilities to climb onto a giant horse, the problem quickly reverses itself.

"The biggest problem we have with a lot of the kids is they won't get off the horse," Holmes said.

Area therapeutic riding centers

There are 20 therapeutic riding centers located in Indiana. Two of them are in Monroe County.

For more information, contact People and Animal Learning Services (PALS) through Fern Bonchek at (812) 336-2798 or at pals@indiana.edu. The PALS Web site is: www.palstherapy.org.

Therapeutic riding lessons also are offered at New Horizons, located at Rocky River Farm on Russell Road in Bloomington. Contact owner Jean Loosemore or trainer Jennifer Lorinsky at (812) 333-0261. The Web site is silentfire@earthlink.net.

Both organizations are members of and accredited by the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association.

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