



Fern Bonchek and one of her "therapists." Photo by Adam Reynolds

## PALS: A Therapeutic Place Where Horses Are Your Pals

When people with physical, cognitive, and emotional disabilities come to PALS, they receive more than therapy. PALS, which stands for People and Animal Learning Services, is a place where clients ride horses and have fun. It is a safe environment in which to learn, socialize, and develop.

PALS is a nonprofit Equine Assisted Program that has provided therapeutic riding for children and adults with disabilities and at-risk youth in Bloomington since 2000. "The really special thing about PALS," says Fern Bonchek, founder and executive director, "is that it's a different kind of therapy, one that's incredibly fun and incredibly empowering."

As the only NARHA (North American Riding for the Handicapped Association) Premier Accredited Center serving the Bloomington area, PALS caters to riders age 4 and up and with any kind of disability. For a rider coming into the program, the PALS instructor will work with his or her therapist to design a specific lesson plan. Riders can work on educational goals, including counting skills and word recognition, as well as physical goals such as sitting up on the horse independently. "As the riders progress and grow in the program, they become more independent in their riding skills," says Bonchek. Many riders have been with PALS since the beginning and have developed strong bonds with their horses and instructors.

For Bonchek, 34, providing horse-based therapy is a natural outgrowth of her upbringing in Bloomington. "My parents run Harmony School, so I grew up in a nonprofit world. I always knew that I wanted to help people."

After high school, Bonchek attended IU to explore degrees. While there, she realized it was possible to combine her love of horses and her passion for helping people by studying therapeutic horseback riding. She left IU for University of Southern California where she received a degree in psychology with a specialization in human and animal interactions. After graduating, Bonchek returned to Bloomington, bringing her passion and knowledge back to the community.

For more information about PALS, visit [palstherapy.org](http://palstherapy.org). People can support PALS by attending the annual Wine/Beer Tasting and Silent Auction, Thursday, June 11 at KRC Catering, 216 S. College. Tickets available on the PALS website, Bloomingfoods, or at the Trojan Horse Restaurant after May 8. PALS is located at 680 W. That Road.

—Ben Madeska