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Fundraiser planned for PALS riding program

By Dann Denny
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Six-year-old Julia Seiler cannot talk, but when she sits in her saddle atop Omaha, her face speaks volumes.

“She gets the biggest grin on her face you can imagine,” said Allisson Seiler, Julia’s mother. “And when Omaha trots, she laughs so hard it makes everyone else laugh with her.”

Julia is one of the hundreds of people who each year participate in People and Animal Learning Services — a therapeutic horseback riding program for children (4 and older) and adults with physical, learning, cognitive or emotional disabilities; as well as at-risk or disadvantaged youth.

Julia, who has cerebral palsy, has been in the program since January, spending a half-hour a week at the PALS riding facility at 680 W. That Road.

“Her first day she tried to get out of it by being a drama queen,” Seiler said. “But I told the trainers to not give in to her, and within minutes she was smiling and having fun. Now, she can’t wait to get on the horse.”

Since its inception in 2000, PALS had provided more than 12,000 therapeutic riding lessons to hundreds of riders in nine counties, including 1,800 lessons to 150 riders in 2009.

Most PALS riders — 65 percent — are between the ages of 5 and 17, while 22 percent are between 25 and 44 and 9 percent are between 45 and 64.

Fern Bonchek, PALS executive director, said the program helps riders improve their joint mobility, balance, muscle tone and coordination. She said it also enhances their self-confidence, concentration and spatial awareness — not to mention just being fun.

“There are a lot of fun things that 6-year-olds do — dancing and running around — that Julia cannot do,” Seiler said. “Riding is something she can do that’s fun. When she’s on that horse, she’s like an ordinary little girl.”

Seiler feels the PALS program taps into a truth expressed by Winston Churchill: “There’s something about the outside of a horse that changes the inside of a man.”

Bonchek relies on more than 150 community volunteers, who lead the horses around and help the riders mount the horses and stay in the saddle. Some riders wear special belts or hold onto special bars instead of reins to keep them stable in the saddle.

Unlike Julia, 6-year-old Tyler Grieb was instantly enthralled the first time he sat on the back of Walter, a chocolate brown horse with a black mane and tail. “He was immediately enthusiastic,” said his father, Scott Grieb. “He took to it right off the bat, and looks forward to it every week.”

Tyler, who has a form of autism, has been riding every week for two and half years. He started with an older, more docile horse. Now he rides Walter, a younger horse with more pep in his step.

“He loves trotting around with side walkers (volunteers who stand on either side of him while he’s in the saddle),” Grieb said. “He also likes turning Walter left and right.”

Grieb said Tyler’s leg and trunk strength have improved from the weekly riding sessions. But he said those byproducts pale compared to the sheer fun of riding.

Tyler has limited verbal skills, but when his dad tells him it’s riding day, his face lights up like a lamp and he says, “Go ride the horse.”

Bonchek said when PALS participants and their family members were interviewed, 75 percent said the program had improved the rider’s self-confidence and 67 percent said it had improved the rider’s balance. Seiler said Julia’s physical, occupational and speech therapists say her riding has helped her make gains in her overall development.

“She can now take independent steps with her walker, and her physical therapist is convinced it’s because of her riding,” Seiler said. “Her grabbing strength and control has also improved. It’s like night and day.”

Seiler said that improved grabbing strength may allow her to take Julia to an amusement park, something she has never been able to do before.

“Before, she didn’t have the ability to hold on to the rides,” she said. “Now I think she can.”

For more information about PALS, visit www.palstherapy.org.

Dinner, auctions planned in June

Those who want to support People and Animal Learning Services can participate in a fundraiser called The Mane Event from 6 to 9 p.m. June 10 at the Clubhouse at the Fields, 1333 S. Fenbrook Lane.

There will be a dinner featuring wine and beer, chicken/beef duet and vegetarian option; live music by the PALS Jazz Trio; and live and silent auctions for such items as park passes to Walt Disney World, vacation packages to places like Italy and Grand Cayman, gift certificates from Bloomington businesses and restaurants and works by local artists.

Attendees will also see a video about the PALS program, and hear the parent of a PALS rider talk about the program.

PALS director Fern Bonchek said she hopes the event will raise more than \$20,000, with all proceeds being used to help PALS riders through scholarships, horse care and special therapy tack and equipment.

Tickets purchased in advance are \$35 at the Trojan Horse or at PALS or \$37 online at www.palstherapy.org/calendar/mane.php. Tickets cost \$40 at the door (if available). You can sponsor a table of eight for \$296.

If you are interested in being a sponsor for the event or would like to donate an auction item, call Bonchek at 812-336-2798.



Julia Seiler, above, rides a horse named Omaha with help from Laura Myers, left, and Van Young. Jeremy Hogan | Herald-Times



Scott Grieb, right, helps his son Tyler with his gear after horse riding at PALS. Jeremy Hogan | Herald-Times

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