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Harnessing Hope

Group helps disabled riders gain confidence, freedom

By Kristi Oloffson | Indiana Daily Student | Friday, September 15, 2006

Five-year-old Magdalena Loring, who goes by Maggie, was

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Maggie Loring, 5, rides her favorite horse Dandy during a lesson at PALS. Maggie, adopted from Guatemala, has fetal alcohol syndrome and has been in the therapeutic riding program for almost a year. Courtesy Photo

adopted from Guatemala at age 2. By the time she was 4, her new parents found that their little girl had fetal alcohol syndrome and apraxia, a neural speech disorder, causing poor coordination and problems with learning.

Her mother, Vicki Loring, said when she learned of the devastating and irreversible effects of the syndrome, she looked for an alternative therapy method to help Maggie. Last October, the Lorings found Parent and Animal Learning Services, a program that gives therapeutic horseback riding lessons to people with disabilities. Private donations and grants help the nonprofit organization, which gives lessons mostly to children but has several adults who come as well. Three full-time staff and as many as 150 weekly volunteers, about 80 percent of whom are IU students, run the program, said Jan Gavin, the program's director of development.

"PALS gives her a special place that's hers. Her world is not in her control ... Being able to get on a horse gives her a sense of power and freedom and to be able to bond."

Vicki Loring
Mother of a PALS participant

Maggie was one of the children running around the barn, located at 680 W. That Road in Bloomington, late Monday afternoon after a riding lesson with Dandy, her favorite horse.

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"Dandy's sweet," she said, smiling.

Clad in pink cowboy boots, Maggie ran into her mother's arms as she arrived to take her child home.

"She's fearless," Loring said. "She's very social and lovable, but very vulnerable, too."

Since riding at PALS, Loring said Maggie has been speaking better, and she enjoys bonding with the horse.

"PALS gives her a special place that's hers," Loring said. "Her world is not in her control ... Being able to get on a horse gives her a sense of power and freedom and to be able to bond."

PALS Executive Director and instructor Fern Bonchek said the benefits for the disabled at PALS are endless. Improving balance, speech and coordination are just some of the gains, she said. Many of the parents bringing their children to PALS said the participants attain confidence most of all.

Bonchek became certified after working at a therapeutic riding program in California before moving back to Bloomington to start a program of her own about five years ago.

"I've always wanted to help people, and I've always loved horses," she said. "It was a way for me to kind of put together my two passions. And there was a great need for the program."

The program now helps kids such as 12-year-old Galina Muzinich, who has been riding in the program for more than five years. She was born with tetrasomy, a genetic disorder with which her mother Natalya said very few people in the world are born. Natalya Muzinich said this causes her to have a low IQ and have issues with sensory processing.

Although Galina has trouble processing information, Natalya Muzinich said her daughter is easy to understand and empathetic.

Riding at PALS allows Galina to do something not all normal kids can do, Natalya Muzinich said.

"She keeps asking for it when she doesn't go for awhile," she said. "It's hard to say how she'd be without it."

Many IU students who volunteer at PALS said they enjoy watching the kids improve.

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"It makes them feel good about themselves that they can do something that's special," volunteer and junior Tracie Davis said. "Usually by the time they leave here, they're really happy."

As Maggie and her mother prepared to depart for the day after Maggie's lesson, they stopped to pet one of the horses together.

"(Being on a horse) gives her a sense of empowerment," Vicki Loring said. "(It) gives her that feeling of being tall in the world, being on a horse. My goal is for her really to be able to ride a horse on her own."

Interested volunteers should contact Bonchek to participate in a training session at 1 p.m. Saturday.

PALS will also be hosting its sixth annual Fun Show Oct. 21, where riders will showcase their skills and talent. For more information on PALS and its program, visit www.palstherapy.org.

