

# HEALING HORSES

## ORGANIZATION USES EQUINE-ASSISTED THERAPY

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Fern Bonchek, instructor and executive director of People & Animal Learning Services, sits in her office, which is within a stable, surrounded by various coats and mud-covered boots. Pictures are peppered throughout the room. Some are paintings of fox hunts and some are of members posing with their horses. The clip-clop of hooves keeps beat with Bonchek's explanation of her program.

"My mother had her riding program in Bloomington," Bonchek said. "This wasn't a foreign idea."

People & Animal Learning Services, founded in July 2000, is a non-profit equine-assisted program designed to help individuals with mental and physical disabilities as well as at-risk youth. The program started with one woman and her desire to bring equine-assisted therapy to Bloomington.

After high school, Bonchek moved to California and enrolled in training at the Fran Joswick Therapeutic Riding Center, one of the oldest equine-assisted therapy programs in the United States, Bonchek said. She stayed for four years after training and went on to become a registered instructor through the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association. She decided to take her new title as a certified therapeutic instructor back to Bloomington.

"I grew up around horses," Bonchek said, "and I always



ANNA BATCHELLER | IDS

Trainer Jennifer Lung watches as Steve McGovern and his horse are guided by Ben Slinkard on Tuesday afternoon at the PALS arena. McGovern regularly competes in the Special Olympics and is currently training for the Special Olympics Equestrian Games in September.

wanted to help people, so PALS was a way to put my two passions together."

Bonchek also teaches R250: Intro to Equine-Assisted Activities in the School of Health, Physical Education, and Recreation during the fall semester.

"The class consists of actual class time and then lab time, which is at the barn," Bonchek said.

In 2008, People & Animal

Learning Services was able to provide more than 1,800 lessons to people with mental and physical disabilities.

Steve McGovern, a 43-year-old with Fragile-X Syndrome, the most common cause of autism, has been riding with People & Animal Learning Services for five years. He is currently training for the Special Olympics Equestrian Games, which will take place Sept. 12 in Danville,

Ind. He has been riding Brynja, a Norwegian Fjord.

"He's working on a dressage test," said Diana McGovern, Steve's mother. "He and Brynja make a nice pair."

The dressage test includes forming various circular patterns and diagonals with the horse. Prior to joining People & Animal Learning Services, Diana and Steve knew Bonchek's mother, Barb Bonchek. Steve McGovern

rode competitively in the past, including the American Royal Horse Show in Kansas City.

Long bars enclose the indoor arena where Steve McGovern and Brynja practice. Letters are strategically posted on bars, directions for where the rider should turn the horse. Dust kicks up throughout the vast stadium as Steve McGovern moves Brynja into a trot.

"He comes here right from

work, and he has been signed up in all three sessions," Diana McGovern said. "He never misses a lesson."

Jennifer Lung is the head riding instructor for the organization. She stands in the middle of the arena observing Steve McGovern and Brynja's patterns and directing the dressage.

"Very nice!" Lung said. "Now you have to bring her from Spot C to Spot H."

Lung said her love for horses began when she was 10 years old. She and her horse, Goodbar, would compete in 4-H Club shows and costume classes. Like Bonchek, People & Animal Learning Services fuses two of Lung's favorite activities.

"I had worked with people with disabilities before, and I had been riding since I was 10," Lung said. "So when I heard about PALS I thought 'Oh cool! It's both!'"

The bond a rider has with his horse is one that is not easily replicated, partly because of the sheer size of the animal, Bonchek said.

"If you put a little 4-year-old on a horse, and they can control this large animal, it is very significant," Bonchek said.

Horses are also attuned to the personalities and attitudes of humans, she said.

"They can tell if you're having a bad day, if you're calm, scared, tired," Bonchek said, leaning slightly forward and smiling. "Other therapy clinics don't have the same mechanics as a horse."