

A sense of self

Riding therapy helps disabled, those recovering from injuries gain self-confidence

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MARK ARONOFF / PD
Bridget Donahoe, 10, rides at the Giant Steps therapeutic equestrian center along the Petaluma River.

Every Saturday at a ranch along the Petaluma River a group of young girls eagerly rush to saddle up their horses. But what happens here is more than the storied bond between little girls and horses or the thrill of going for a ride on a bright fall morning.

This is the Giant Steps therapeutic equestrian center off Lakeville Highway in Petaluma, where people with developmental and physical disabilities come to work on balance, focus and core strengthening, improve their ability to walk, and pick up social skills and learn responsibility. Their family members, doctors and riding instructors consider it therapy. To

the riders it's just plain giddy-up fun.

Ten-year-old Bridget Donahoe, in green helmet and pink gloves, rides Scarlet, a Tennessee walker. Bridget, who lives in San Rafael, has cortical dysplasia, a congenital malformation in the brain which causes developmental delays and sometimes seizures. She is also slightly autistic, explained her mother, Maureen Donahoe, who is watching from the other side of the fence.

Bridget has been riding horses since she was 6, the past two-and-a-half years at Giant Steps. “Every time we come here there’s always some surprise thing she has learned,” her mother said. “I can tell because I know that look when she’s really connected to something.”

Academically, Bridget is at the pre-kindergarten level, but here she rides like everyone else and is more skilled than some. She even takes a special vaulting class, which is like gymnastics on horseback, and has started helping other riders learn to do such fancy things as stand and kneel on a horse and pivot in the saddle.

“They talk about some children who are born with disabilities eventually becoming ‘therapy-dead,’” said Sandy Webster, program director for Giant Steps.

“They get to where they don’t want to try anything more. But this is not a clinical setting. This is fun. It doesn’t feel like therapy.”

BUILD CORE STRENGTH

For example, she said, one goal in Bridget’s riding program is to build up her core strength, which she possibly could accomplish by doing sit-ups.

“But if you asked her to do 20 sit-ups, she’d be fighting it all the way,” she said.

There are 96 riders at Giant Steps, most of them children with disabilities that include attention deficit disorder, cerebral palsy, cystic fibrosis, Down syndrome and multiple sclerosis.

There are also adults who use riding therapy after a stroke or spinal cord injury. A special riding program that focuses on building trust and confidence is designed for teenagers who have been abused or are otherwise considered at risk.

Giant Steps, started in 1998 by Robert Pope and Lee Justice, is one of many equestrian therapy programs in the country. Pope and his wife were planning to retire to Montana to raise horses, but they heard about therapeutic riding, sold the Montana ranch and moved to the Bay Area to start Giant Steps.

In the past three years it has doubled in size, even though participants largely pay out of pocket, at \$50 a session, with some scholarship help.

Equi-Ed, which stands for Equines and Education, is a similar program based at Santa Rosa Junior College. It works with riders of all ages, with and without special needs, and is the only college-based program in California that trains instructors in therapeutic riding.

STRONGER, MORE CONFIDENT

Carin Lawrence from Becoming Independent, an agency that provides educational and job opportunities for people with disabilities in the North Bay, said the benefits of such programs are well known, especially the “dramatic improvement in ambulation.”

Participants from her agency only recently started the Giant Steps program and are still finding their comfort level on horseback. But she said they already seem “stronger and more confident.”

“In the physical sense, nothing is closer to a human stride than a horse walking,” said Pope. “So for a child with cerebral palsy, the horse’s legs become the legs of the riders. This fools the brain into thinking the body is walking, which opens up the neural pathways to develop balance and muscle tone. Plus it gives the riders an enormous dose of self-esteem.”

Participants in the program — who are called riders, not patients or clients — have a set of goals determined by Webster after consulting with family members, caregivers, therapists and doctors.

“No one gets on a horse without his or her physician signing off,” said Webster.

And no one gets on the horse alone. A rider may have three people accompanying him, including an instructor and two volunteers who walk next to rider and horse.

The 11 trained therapy horses at Giant Steps are selected, said Webster, for their “good personality, low flight response and because they’re not easily startled.”

They also have the perfect rhythmical gait, a four-beat walk, she said, that speaks to a rider’s body and translates successfully to the person with an abnormal gait or who walks with a cane or uses a wheelchair.

“When a horse walks, each leg moves separately and the result of that walking gait causes the horse’s back to swing forward and back, side to side and rotational. The rider then passively receives that repetitive swinging movement, from the pelvis up,” Webster explained.

“It’s very rhythmical and the effect is that the rider, to stay in alignment and balance on that horse, must contract and co-contract their muscles as if they were walking themselves.”

UNUSUALLY FOCUSED

In another Saturday class at Giant Steps, Zack Horon, age 9, rides Pepe, also a Tennessee walker. Zack is autistic and doesn’t speak. So instead of a verbal command he has learned to use a waving hand motion to tell Pepe when he wants him to walk forward.

On horseback, Zack is unusually focused and able to follow instructions, said Webster, explaining that children with autism seek stimulation in the form of rocking or other movement.

“It helps them feel settled in their body,” she said. “But when this is provided by the horse’s movement, the child can go calm and be better able to focus, to make eye contact. It’s like the body says ‘thank you’ to the horse — ‘Now I can learn.’”

Zack’s parents, Keri and Robert Horton, said their son is more coordinated and stronger since he started riding. “It’s also helped him learn to dance,” said his mother.

And because part of riding a horse is grooming and caring for the animal, Zack now helps at home cleaning up the kitchen.

“They’re all life skills that we’re working toward,” said Webster, “but we’re use riding skills as the tool to do it.”

Bridget Donahoe, said her mother, has “incredible pride” about her riding. “She tells people, ‘Yeah, I go riding on Saturdays.’”

And it’s not just Saturday when life gets better. In riding class Bridget made the first two real friends she’s ever had and now they have play dates during the week.

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