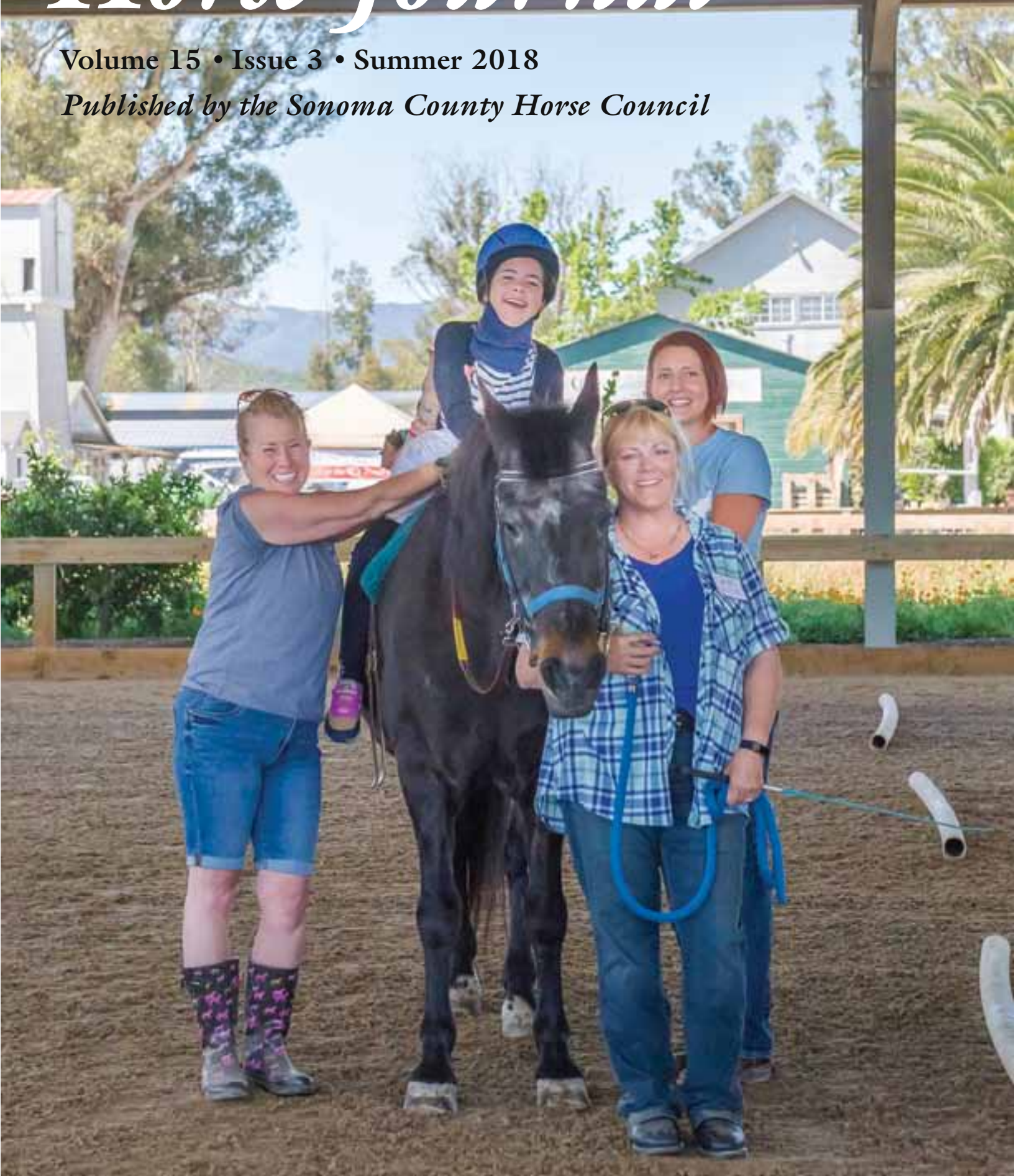


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# Giant Steps—The Making of a Therapy Horse

By Beth Porter



A happy group of volunteers, horses and riders.

One of the questions I am asked most frequently is what type of horse is best-suited for therapy work. The short answer is bomb-proof. The long answer is more nuanced.

Being bomb-proof is non-negotiable. Our clients present with a wide range of disabilities—some physical, others cognitive, many behavioral. A child with autism might rock, flap, or have outbursts. Our amazing equine therapists must remain calm and focused throughout. A rider with cerebral palsy may have difficulty maintaining balance or controlling the reins. Our amazing equine therapists must follow the cues given them. A number of our clients mount using our equestrian lift. Our amazing equine therapists must stand stock still between a mounting block and an off side block with a volunteer on it, with another volunteer standing in front, while a human moves through the air to land on his back. Not all horses could handle these challenges, by any stretch.

Next, the horse must truly love people—all sorts of people. This is not a job for a one-girl pony. The only way we can operate our program is through our incredible volunteer pool, who number 125 per week. They groom and tack our horses, serve as leaders and side walkers in the arena, and maintain our facilities. As a result, our horses encounter a wide assortment of people. While our volunteers are trained in when and how to enter a stall, reading horse body language, and working with the horse in “the Giant Steps way” so that there is as much consistency as possible, this

can be a strain for a horse that isn't a total people person. When a horse comes to us on trial and the placement fails, the cause is as common as the horse's discomfort in working with so many people as it is behavior during lessons.

We recruit horses of all sizes, gaits, and temperaments. Small horses are suited to clients who need physical support to stay balanced on their horse (it is much easier to practice a thigh hold at elbow height than shoulder height).

Large horses accommodate larger riders, including many of our military veteran participants. Wide horses suit riders with balance challenges. Narrow horses allow riders with tight muscle tone to sit more comfortably. Horses with a slow gait teach riders to keep a leg on, while more animated horses teach riders control. Each of our clients is carefully matched

with a horse that best suits that client's particular needs. Since our clients' needs vary widely, so must our horses' characteristics.

When we recruit a horse, it comes to us on trial for three to four months. At first, we let the horse just acclimate to life in the barn. We let it get to know horsey neighbors, and adjust to the new home's sights, sounds and smells. Only staff enter the stall so that it has to meet as few people as possible. Next, a seasoned volunteer will lead the horse during class, without a client, so that the horse starts to understand what we expect. We also introduce it to the mounting block, equestrian lift, and other equipment we use. When the horse demonstrates it is comfortable with all the activity without a rider, we have it participate in class with an able-bodied rider. If all goes well, both in the barn and in the arena, we will finally add the horse to the program. It is a very intentional process, and we have been fortunate to build a fabulous herd.



Franklin makes a new friend, a visitor from one of our Community Partners.

Beth Porter is the Executive Director of Giant Steps Therapeutic Equestrian Center. To learn more, visit [www.giantstepsriding.org](http://www.giantstepsriding.org) or email [julie@giantstepsriding.org](mailto:julie@giantstepsriding.org).

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