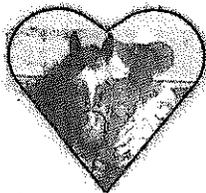


Hey Neighbor



For The Love Of Horses

By Frank J. Buchman

Therapeutic Riding School Improves Lives

Life is happier and healthier for those with disabilities when they attend the Independence Farms, Inc., School of Therapeutic Riding.

Usually at least a handful, and sometimes more, handicapped youth and adults gather at Washington on Sundays from Easter through Thanksgiving for the opportunity to ride horses.

"Independence Farms, Inc., School of Therapeutic Riding is dedicated to developing independence and good mental, physical, and social health for all children and adults through the healing power of horses, a farm atmosphere and nature," according to Michelle Woerner, Linn, founding board member.

"Six years ago, four of us

started a pilot program using some suitable old horses we had and received help from volunteers to offer riding instruction at no charge for several handicapped people in the area," continued Woerner.

The school became a non-profit corporation in July, 2001, and now has an eight member board of directors. Woerner and Terri Gauby of Washington are certified instructors, after going through stringent training, apprenticeship and testing.

"We are members of the North American Riding For The Handicapped Association (NARHA)," explained Woerner, state chairman for the organization, which has 10 affiliates in Kansas.

"NARHA fosters safe, professional, ethical and

therapeutic equine activities through education, communication, standards and research for people with and without disabilities," Woerner said.

"We follow the standards and ethics set forth by NARHA for therapeutic riding organizations throughout the United States," she added. Kansas is with Nebraska, Missouri and Iowa as one of 11 regions in the national organization.

Therapeutic riding classes are conducted on Sunday

afternoons at the Washington County Fairgrounds, with indoor and outdoor arenas. "We are fortunate that the county lets us use these facilities at no charge," Woerner acknowledged.

There have been over 20 youth and adults from as far away as Salina, Abilene and Sabetha participate in the riding sessions. "We have an average attendance of about five handicapped persons attend on Sunday afternoons. We offer one-hour group sessions with two or more riders and one-half hour individual sessions," Woerner related.

Disabilities have included multiple sclerosis, attention deficit disorders, those with speech, hearing and emotional difficulties, the wheelchair bound and others.

Key essential element of the school is qualified horses. "We have been fortunate

that we've had some old horses that have worked well for us. We are also now leasing some ponies," Woerner noted.

Before any horses are used, they must meet stringent requirements for gentleness and attitude. "We test every horse with a variety of riders before we put them into the program," Woerner assured.

Volunteers are also imperative to the program. "They are people who care about people and may or may not have an interest in horses," Woerner commented. "They give of their time,

knowledge, skills and themselves, without asking for anything in return.

"Well, maybe nothing, but a smile or to see an activity accomplished by one of our riders," she added.

"Volunteers are one of the most important components in a successful therapeutic riding program. There are many areas in which one can help," Woerner emphasized.

For those interested in being a rider, contact must be made with the school to get details worked out. "We set up the paperwork, and then a consultation will in-



Six-year-old Will of Salina reflects his joy of horseback riding at the Independence Farms, Inc., School of Therapeutic Riding. Assistance is being provided by Kristy Fulton, Hollenberg; Kevin Woerner, Linn; and Amanda Jordan, Beatrice, Neb.

clude the parent or guardian, the rider, an instructor and a volunteer therapist or special education teacher, who will assist in structuring lesson plans. We take pride in preparing for our riders," the instructor said.

Participants in the therapeutic riding classes are typically anxious to ride the horses. "They soon learn which horse is the one they ride, and some of them are able and willing to help get the horses groomed and saddled. The horses learn their riders too," Woerner said.

Much change is seen in the handicapped riders after just a few sessions. "Their balance is so improved, and they usually have more movement in their legs," the instructor credited. "The riders' confidence is built up, and they become so motivated. It's

just plain entertainment for some of them."

Lessons only cost participants \$20, so expenses far exceed income for the school. "We have fund raisers and do have some generous donors who have assisted with the program," Woerner said. "We are always looking for additional volunteers, horses, contributors and assistance."

A lightweight mounting ramp was long needed by the school and has just been added to the program recently. "It is wheelchair ac-

cessible and eases mounting for all levels of riders," described Woerner.

Among present needs of the school are horse feed, veterinary supplies, hoof care products, fly spray, industrial rubber floor mats, lead ropes and helmets for the riders. "We always welcome rider sponsorships for those who might need financial assistance," the instructor related.

"We sincerely appreciate everything that everyone has done for us," Woerner said.

Directors of the group in addition to Woerner and Gauby, the treasurer, are Kristy Fulton, president; Hollenberg; Melissa Ditmars, vice president; Washington; Donna Frye, secretary; Haddam; Becky Hughes, fundraising chairperson; Washington; Bill Slater, parent, Morrowville; and Tracy Turner, Washington.

Additional information is available by calling (785) 348-5789 or (785) 325-2719. Email address is ifinstructor@bluevalley.net.

Therapeutic Riding School Improves Lives Of Handicapped People

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