



health & fitness

A horse, of course.

Birmingham Special Equestrians offers therapeutic riding

BY KARYN ZWEIFEL
PHOTOS COURTESY OF
BIRMINGHAM SPECIAL EQUESTRIANS

ASK ANYBODY: "How old were you when you first asked for a pony for Christmas?" Nine out of ten people will answer with a smile. The powerful attraction between humans and horses is ancient, and that bond is increasingly recognized as therapeutic for people with physical, developmental, emotional and mental challenges.

"Horses are magnificent, graceful, powerful animals," says Justin Fisher, a professor of economics at Jefferson State

Community College. "In a wheelchair, there are places I can't get to. When I'm on my crutches, it's a very slow, laborious process. But when I'm riding, I'm as able as any other able-bodied rider."

Justin was born with cerebral palsy, which affects his ability to use his legs. "My father put me on a horse literally before I could walk," he recalls. "I rode until I got too big for my dad to pick me up." Justin discovered the Birmingham Special Equestrians program in 2000 and has been an avid participant ever since. He rides independently, but the program serves many others with hour-long classes in therapeutic riding.

Physical therapy that's fun.

"The motion of a horse mimics exactly the motion of a human being walking," explains Kathleen Claybrook, executive director of the Birmingham Special Equestrians program. "That's very difficult to mimic in physical therapy." When a horse walks,

[health&fitness]



the rider's hips and legs move as if he or she were actually walking. "It stimulates nerves while adding muscle strength," she continues. "It improves posture, core muscles in the abdomen and the center of gravity." Physical and occupational therapists provide evaluations and plans for individual riders, who ride in groups of four to six.

Kathleen started as a volunteer 21 years ago, soon after the program was founded by Rita Mendel, Patrice Murphy, Annette Troxell and Pam Abdulla. Located on 10 acres leased from Indian Springs School, the program houses nearly a dozen horses and provides classes to 94 riders weekly. Surrounded by woods, the weathered old barn of rough-cut oak is breezy and pleasantly redolent of straw and clean, healthy animals. Classes are held in a covered arena, with a certified instructor and several volunteers beside each rider, one to lead the horse and others to help the rider understand and follow directions.

Birmingham Special Equestrians serves both children and adults. "When you put someone on a horse, it boosts self-esteem," Kathleen says. "This is one area where children with autism get positive results. On a horse, things get simplified. The horse communicates on a different level and a child doesn't have to use difficult communication skills. Instead they can kick with their legs or pull on the reins."

Matt Bunt is one of the instructors certified by the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA). He says that although a few children are fearful of the horse at first, virtually all of them learn to ride. "I was walking with a rider this morning, and two or three years ago he wouldn't get on a horse or even touch it," Matt chuckles. "Now he loves it. Give them a few weeks riding and they'll be crying not to get off the horse."

He adds, "There's a connection—I'm not sure how—with something that large. It's empowering that you can control a 1,000-pound animal." Matt is making a career of that mysterious link between horses and humans. He is completing a master's degree in counseling paired with certification for equine-assisted psychotherapy. This type of riding is different from therapeutic riding and involves more interaction with the horse, supervised by a horse trainer and a therapist. "The horse is a very reactive animal, a flight animal, and gives clients immediate feedback," Matt explains. "Once you see it in action, it's just amazing how people respond to a horse." Birmingham Special Equestrians will sponsor a pilot program for equine assisted psychotherapy in 2009.

Donating money, time, horses and hay make it possible.

As you may imagine, the character of the horse is key to its usefulness as a tool for any kind of therapy. "We get all of our horses by donation," Kathleen says. Most are show horses no longer able to compete. "They have to be extremely quiet and 'bomb proof,' with good gaits. The better the gait on the horse, the better it's transferred to the rider.

"Horses are intuitive," she adds. "With a tentative rider, a horse will take smaller steps. I've seen a horse drop his head into the lap of a wheelchair-bound person, just like he somehow knew that person couldn't stand up."

Any Santa Claus who's considered a pony as a Christmas gift knows how expensive it is. Birmingham Special Equestrians relies heavily on volunteer help to care for the horses and assist with les-

There's something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man. WINSTON CHURCHILL

sons. Donations are always needed for essentials such as feed, tack, office work and maintenance on the arena and grounds. The program's 250 volunteers make it possible to charge fees based on a sliding scale. "We have scholarships for anyone who needs them," Kathleen says. "But we do have a waiting list of six months to a year." The riders at Birmingham Special Equestrians affirm that it's worth the wait. Professor Justin Fisher believes in the program so much that he now serves on its board of directors. "Winston Churchill said 'there's something about the outside of a horse that's good for the inside of a man,' and that's so true," Justin remarks. "I've said for a long time now that one of the neatest things you can give a person with a disability is their independence, because the one thing independence brings that you can't give is dignity." For more information, contact specialequest.org or call 205.987.9462. ◉