

FAIR OAKS RANCH

MAGAZINE

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TRIPLE H EQUI-THERAPY CENTER

Restoring health and happiness

TRIPLE H

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Animal Control Officer Kendall Webster
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Triple H Equitherapy Center

By Susan Marx

There is nothing quite like the exhilarating experience of taking a horse through its paces in the arena, cantering down a country lane or riding a hilly trail on horseback. In those moments horse and rider become as one – each taking the other to heights they wouldn't scale alone. All that and more pulses at the heart of Pipe Creek's "Horses Helping the Handicapped Therapeutic Riding Center" known as Triple H Equitherapy Center.

Founded in 1995, Triple H Equitherapy Center rests on 120 private wooded acres about 20 miles north of San Antonio. It features 20 horse stalls, two arenas, riding trails and a wheelchair-mounting ramp to assist the disabled and physically challenged.

Executive director Loida Molloy manages a small caring staff that includes Development Director Julie Dahlberg, Volunteer/Program Coordinator Keisha Laughy, barn assistants, veterinarians, horse handlers, four instructors and more than 75 volunteers.

Molloy said they currently have about 21 horses, which, like the people they serve, come from all kinds of backgrounds. The horses don't undergo special training either – other than basic verbal cues and reigning. The chief pre-requisite for Triple H horses is their gentle, tolerant temperament. Highly skilled instructors and individual therapists work with student clients to leverage the healing effects of caring for and riding horses.

Equine assisted therapy originated in Europe – inspired by the polio-stricken horsewoman Liz Hartel who won the Grand Prix silver medal in the 1952 Helsinki Olympics. Since then therapists and physicians the world over have used 'equine assisted therapy' to bring improved health to the physically disabled, war wounded and at-risk youth. There are several programs available including:

- Hearts, Hooves and Heroes – a school based therapeutic horseback riding program for children enrolled in special education classes. Courses of treatment typically involve a one-hour session per week and range from 8-12 weeks.
- From Fear to Responsibility - an equine-assisted mental health program that assists abused children and at-risk youths under the direction of a therapist. Courses of treatment are customized. Treatment usually lasts 8-12 weeks.
- Riding to Independence – custom-designed programs for the developmentally disabled. Treatment is typically long-term with on-going one-hour, weekly sessions lasting over many years.
- Horses for Heroes – customized therapy for disabled veterans that addresses physical rehabilitation from injury on the battlefield and psychotherapeutic recovery from the mental and emotional trauma known as posttraumatic stress.

Although there are a variety of student clients within these categories, Molloy said about 90 percent of their student clients fit in the first three programs and most of the other 10 percent are disabled vets who participate in Horses for Heroes. As you can imagine, these groups represent a wide range of physical and emotional challenges.



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So how is it possible that riding horses heals abused children, rehabilitates at-risk youth restores peace and dignity to disabled veterans and improves the lives of those suffering from Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Muscular Dystrophy and Down Syndrome?

Molloy said, "Horses are focused on the present." This, she said, comes from the fact that horses are prey animals. Thousands of years spent surviving in the wild and evading predators has made them highly sensitive to what's going on around them.

According to The Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship, riding a horse moves the rider's body in a manner similar to the human gait. So the physically handicapped often show improvement in flexibility, balance and muscle strength just from riding the gentle giants.

In the psychotherapeutic mode, student clients are hands-on with a horse and learn to respect it as a sentient being. The horse's interactions actions and behaviors during a session are regarded as valid input for the student client's personal improvement.

Molloy said horses immediately sense how a person is feeling and mirror that behavior. If a student is nervous, upset or afraid the horse will act the same. Their ability to empathize also enables them to know when someone is depressed or otherwise in trouble.

As an example, Molloy said that once, while out riding with a young student, the horse suddenly stopped. The instructor and side walker along for the ride didn't understand it but on further investigation they discovered the student was suffering a mild seizure. The horse knew there was a problem and acted as a therapeutic partner. The child was immediately attended to, recovered from the episode and rode back to the stable.

Each of the programs has unique components but all of them teach student clients trust through the experience of successfully handling a 1,000 lb animal and that, Molloy said, builds self-esteem. Students also groom and care for the same horse throughout the course of their treatment. Through this combination of activities, horse and rider form a bond and that intimate connection is a large part of the magic that leads to healing.

Molloy said they are very much in volunteer recruitment mode. No experience is necessary, just a desire to help and the willingness to make a commitment. Volunteers often report that they too receive therapeutic benefit from assisting in the ranch activities whether it's mucking out a stall or helping in the office. Being involved in restoring the health and happiness of others is one of the best investments you can make in yourself.

