

Faces Light *Up*

Photos & Text by Cindy V. Bryant

LEARN HOW GENTLE GIANTS HELP ADULTS AND CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES. KNOWN AS EQUINE THERAPY... IT'S MUCH MORE THAN A PONY RIDE IN THE BACKYARD.





Riding therapy can provide miracles in the life of a child or adult with mental, physical or psychological disabilities. Established in 2004 by Dovie Barrett, 7 Star is a PATH (Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship, International) Center with PATH certified instructors who have specialized training. They know which exercises work best for conditions such as Autism Spectrum, stroke, ADD-ADHD, visual impairment, cerebral palsy, hearing loss or muscular dystrophy.

Instructors, volunteers and parents all agree—almost every client is delighted to see their favorite therapy team. Sidewalker, Lauren Castillo says, “I started helping three or four years ago. I like seeing the kids’ faces light up.” Clients are as young as three and there are two, fifty-something adults in the program. Young or weak clients begin riding on a bareback pad, and heat from the animal’s back helps to loosen stiff muscles. As therapy progresses, riders graduate to an English saddle, which is easier to mount.

Instructor, Colleen Randall Vermolen, personalizes skill builders for each client. A person with cerebral palsy may not receive the same exercises as a stroke victim. Riding enables clients to develop confidence and self-esteem, and the benefits of equine therapy also extend to home and school. Children seem to be able to pay better attention in class and display fewer behavioral problems. Many voluntarily tackle chores at home.

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TALON WILK-MURPHY, WHO STARTED THERAPY SEVERAL YEARS AGO, HAS DEVELOPED SELF-CONFIDENCE AND ENJOYS SOCIALIZING WITH OTHERS. RIDING MAKES HIM WORK HARDER THAN HIS REGULAR THERAPIES, AND HE DOESN'T MIND A BIT.





Exercises are designed to strengthen core muscles as well as those of arms and legs. They include the "airplane" with outstretched arms that also rotate in circles, the "frog" in which clients raise their legs and hold to a count of ten and "trip around the world" during which a client makes a 360 degree turn on the saddle.

Success stories generated by riding therapy are profound. For example, two years ago when Omar Villaseca first came to 7 Star, he was painfully shy, walked on his tippy toes and was unable to run. He couldn't climb four steps to get on the mounting ramp without help. Now, Omar is running, easily able to negotiate steps, enthusiastically greets everyone he sees and is simply... happy. Talon Wilk-Murphy, who started therapy several years ago, has developed self-confidence and enjoys socializing with others. Riding makes him work harder than his regular therapies, and he doesn't mind a bit.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Dylan Miller rides on a bareback pony. The pony allows the horse's head to release the pressure. **THIS PAGE TOP:** From left to right: Harriet, JoAnn and Pam Schult with Elwood. **MIDDLE:** Talon Wilk-Murphy also does stretching exercises, which help build stronger muscles. He follows owner Lauren Harri.



Pam Schulte practices with exercises which help strengthen arm muscles and dexterity. Washoe Made is the sidewalker and Cotton Myles is the horse.

Perhaps the most dramatic change has been in 53 year-old, Pam Schulte, who has cerebral palsy and is mentally and physically challenged. She arrived for her first session in a wheelchair, unable to talk. She soon graduated to a walker and now walks into the arena on her own, grinning and waving to everyone. For the first time in her life, she's able to make her bed, collect waste baskets to empty into the kitchen trash container and fold clothes. Not only is she speaking in four to six word sentences, but at home, she's learning the alphabet. Pam's mother, Joann Schulte, says that she and her husband, Harold, never dreamed they would have such an able, happy daughter. Pete Lucero, 7 Star's instructor-in-training says, "It was amazing to see her condition progress in the little time that we've had her. It's amazing to see the progress and results that come from riding."

This non-profit organization uses highly trained horses for sessions. These gentle giants have learned to tolerate clients who may erupt with loud noises or squeals of delight. They also stay calm when a client rides backwards, sidesaddle or works arm muscles by catching a ball. These equines are "bomb proof." In other words, they aren't easily spooked and don't bite or kick. Tom, an American Quarter Horse, is a retired roping horse with a fantastic work ethic. Another Quarter horse, Captain, also works well and is always ready for a rider.



Left to Right: Lisa Lucero, Volunteer Coordinator, Jacobie Frilly, Ashley Gilroy, Wade Kraybill, and a volunteer with a 7 Star Equine Assisted Learning program. Photo by Lisa Lucero

Blizzard, a white gelding, is a superb therapy animal that works cattle on his days off. Buddy, a Haflinger pony, is perfect for smaller riders.

Safety is important to the folks at 7 Star. Volunteer coordinator, Lisa Lucero, says, "I make sure that safety precautions are met. I take care of all of the paperwork on all clients. I keep an eye on what exercises they're doing, what they need to do next and what size helmets they wear. I make sure everything runs smoothly." Each rider has a safe riding helmet with a secure fit. Break away stirrups are standard equipment and the arena floor is a mixture of sand and soil for the horses' comfort. During sessions, two people, called sidewalkers, help hold the rider steady. A leader holds the horse's lead rope, and they start and stop around the arena following the instructor's commands. Lisa Lucero adds, "They make sure there are no mishaps and

they provide some stability for our clients if needed. We make sure our riders are safe on the horse. It's amazing to see faces light up with huge smiles. Some kids won't speak to a person, but will talk to a horse."

7 Star has added another program to their lineup, EAGALA (Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association). Gwen Murphy, LPC (Licensed Professional Counselor) is the EAGALA Mental Professional and Pete Lucero is an EAGALA Equine Specialist. They provide equine-assisted psychotherapy to clients.

EAGALA takes a team approach, utilizing an equine specialist, mental health professional and horse. No horseshack riding is involved. Instead, the client and team work on the ground. EAGALA supports the notion that all clients have the best solutions for themselves when given a chance to discover

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TOP: Dylan Murphree helps a client with a physical therapy exercise. **MIDDLE:** A client with a physical therapy exercise. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Dylan Murphree helps a client with a physical therapy exercise. **BOTTOM:** A client with a physical therapy exercise.

them. Murphy and Lucero allow the clients to experiment and solve problems, using the horse.

Why is the horse important? These social animals have distinct personalities, attitudes and moods. Horses mirror human body language and when people change, the equine responds differently. Horses have many characteristics that allow them to be effective agents of change, including honesty, awareness and nonverbal communication.

These great animals touch everyone at 7 Star and equine therapy has even provided purpose and direction for volunteers. Abby McCarty says, "I have a lot of experience with horses, but after being out here for a while, I got into the therapy. Now I'm considering physical therapy as a choice when I go to college." Volunteer, Stacie Bohannan, says, "I like to see just what the power of a horse can do to help clients... how they can really help, whether it's a disability or something that suddenly came on, like a stroke or change their muscles, without the client realizing they are working them." Experts may not know exactly how riding therapy works, but one thing is certain. . . nearly anyone, no matter their age, can benefit from riding therapy. It helps posture, muscle tone and gives the rider the gift of improved self-esteem and in many cases, unbridled joy.

Murphy reports, "When the volunteers and staff are working with the clients 30 minutes a week, we can see changes in that client. To think of what families see from day to day is amazing. We just see a tidbit of what's going on. It's good to see that progress and to hear from the family." Located east of Amarillo, 7 Star is a 501(c)(3) organization. For more information, visit www.7starhorsetherapy.org or call 806-355-4773. ♠ **ALM**