



816 NORTH

## Therapeutic horse riding lets equestrians take the reins over their disabilities

*Special to The Star*

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In 2008, with their own children grown, Sheila and Terry Yarnell chose to foster a 5-week-old baby with cerebral palsy.

“It didn’t take us long to fall in love with Lindsay and adopt her,” Terry Yarnell said. “But the doctors told us that if she lived, she would likely never leave her bed or raise her head.”

Today, Lindsay is alive, thriving — and passionate about riding horses. In 2012, she began attending equine therapeutic riding at New Horizon Ranch in Rantoul, Kan. When she started this journey, Lindsay could not sit up by herself and needed the assistance of several therapists to keep her in the saddle.

ADVERTISING

Sample note: While editing this story, I took extra care to use inclusive language when talking about disabilities. At one point a quote read that some of the clients were "confined to wheelchairs." I spoke with the news editor of this piece and we decided to leave that part of the quote out because wheelchairs give people with disabilities freedom to move rather than limit them.



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With the instruction of New Horizon owners and directors Joy and Brian Miller, and Lindsay's own grit and determination, she can now sit tall in the saddle as she reins her horse, J.J., along New Horizon's tree-lined trails.

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"Lindsay loves it," Sheila Yarnell says. "She just loves it."

Therapeutic equine centers meet a special need for those who face a wide array of physical limitations or other challenges. According to Colleen Baker, executive director of Northland Therapeutic Riding Center in Holt, Mo., riders can fully participate in this activity that is not only fun, but also healing, strengthening and confidence-building.

River Luck, 10, experienced a traumatic brain injury at age 2, and at 3, he started equine therapy at Northland.

"River wasn't walking the first week we took him to ride. Between that first session and the second the following week, he started walking," said his father, Mike Luck. "As a parent, it was like a miracle. We went back and have stayed since."

Therapeutic riding is especially invaluable to people who use wheelchairs, Baker said.

"The joy it brings riders is incredible," she said. "... Maybe they (wheelchair users) can't play soccer or dance, but they can ride a horse."

A horse's movement requires riders to use the same muscles as those used for walking. This is one of the signature elements of equine therapeutic riding. When a person is unable to walk on their own, riding a horse will develop their core muscles and improve balance, posture and strength.

Equine therapy is a powerful form of therapy in many other ways. It can increase cognitive and fine motor skills, reading and language abilities, and social skills.

"River struggles with being socially appropriate," Luck says. "His therapy sessions are also an opportunity to practice his socialization and communication skills."

Both centers use best practices of the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship, equine therapy's governing entity. Among other practices, riders are accompanied by their instructors and side-walkers, who have been trained or even certified in these best practices.

Patience on the part of riders, therapists and volunteers — not to mention the horses — is key to the therapeutic riding process. Though some success can happen immediately, for many riders, consistency and time lead to growth.

The horses, with their peaceful and sweet temperaments, are the key. Riders become deeply attached to "their" horses, building profound bonds and love for them.

"I saw a 7-year-old boy hug a horse and show emotion to the horse," Baker said. The boy "had never shown emotion in his life. Because he had built trust with the horse, he was then able to transfer that to his family."

Matt and Tammy Syverson, of Olathe, and their four children have ridden at New Horizon since 2010. For Matt, the most unexpected outcome of equine therapy has been his daughter's reading development. Lily, who has Down syndrome, started riding when she was 4.

As part of her therapy, Lily participated in New Horizon's Giddy Up and Read program.



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“The horse’s movement stimulates Lily’s verbal sensors and speech center, helping her read better,” Matt Syverson says. “This is also one of the few family events we can all do together. It’s the perfect way for everyone to be part of the same activity.”

Levi, the Syverson’s 6-year-old son adopted from China, was born with a serious heart defect. At 2, Levi was one of the youngest cowboys to ever saddle up at New Horizon. “Levi started riding while he was in diapers, with side-walkers keeping him safe in the saddle. Riding has helped Levi build his strength and core, and also helped him become one with our family.”

Both centers provide a variety of programs and summer camps, offering therapy to clients of all ages. New Horizon partners with KidsTLC in Olathe and other organizations through their Mending Fences Program.

“Mending Fences is an experiential program for kids at risk, those who have mental health issues or have been abused and suffered trauma,” Joy Miller says.

Because both facilities have limited full-time staff, they rely on a strong corps of volunteers.

“In 2016, we had 151 volunteers at Northland,” Baker said. “The Eagle Scouts, Cerner, Sam’s Club and Liberty Mutual all send a lot of volunteers.”

The volunteers and Baker make the program work, Luck said. “They build a relationship with River like the horses do. It’s a community, really.”

But the program’s biggest stars are the horses.

“These horses heal what ails you,” Matt Syverson said. “If it’s Down syndrome, trauma or abuse, a stroke or brain injury, these horses can probably help. I am not saying they will miraculously heal you, but they will definitely improve your quality of life.”

The Millers and Baker have provided hope and healing to riders across the metro area. Yet, they had different journeys in reaching their destinations.

The Millers, who have always loved horses, said they were called to travel as missionaries for many years. Then, in 2000, they attended a therapy riding demonstration.

“At that moment, we saw a way we could use our love of horses, the ranch and our passion for serving people together. Finding this has been finding our purpose in life,” Joy Miller said.

Baker’s career has always been tied to the equestrian world. She trained riders and show horses on a national level before taking on her current role at Northland.

“It makes you feel good when these riders can sit up on their horses, laughing and trotting. This is their blue ribbon. It is more joy than I have seen on champions’ faces.”

A HISTORIC THERAPY

Therapeutic horseback riding has a centuries-old history. It was used in ancient Greece to help rehabilitate wounded soldiers. In England during World War I, therapeutic riding was also used treat injured soldiers. In the mid-20th century, it was used as an effective therapy for those overcoming polio. Danish polio victim Lis Hartel won the silver medal in dressage at the 1952 Olympic games.

Therapeutic riding was introduced to the United States in 1969, with the first center in Michigan. Since then, this therapy has grown, with more than 600 accredited riding centers currently open in the United States.

KANSAS CITY AREA EQUINE THERAPY CENTERS AND PROGRAMS

- New Horizon Ranch, Inc., 1526 Vermont Road., Rantoul, Kan.; 913-620-2788

Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH) Center Member

- Northland Therapeutic Riding Center, 13608 Henson Road., Holt, Mo., 816-808-1209

Premier Accredited PATH Center Member

- Heartland Therapeutic Riding Center, 16511 W. 116th Road., Bucyrus, Kan.; 913-897-3939

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• Due West Therapeutic Riding Center, 13400 Donahoo Road., Kansas City, Kan.; 913-244-2771

PATH Center Member

• Dream Catchers Equine Assisted Programs, 7550 N.E. Crouch Road., Cameron, Mo.; 816-649-0519

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