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Therapeutic Ride: Children and adults with disabilities get a lift through the Naples Equestrian Challenge

Story by Ralf Kircher / Photography by Ben Gray

Some North Naples retirees aren't about to let themselves be turned out to pasture. They may be a little long in the tooth, but they're making the best of their grazing years by giving a little back to the community. This won't come as a surprise to most; after all, a lot of people volunteer their time when they retire.

Except these retirees aren't people.

They're horses.

Every Saturday morning from 8 a.m. to noon these five horses are the main players in **Naples Equestrian Challenge** Inc., a nonprofit therapeutic riding program for children and adults with physical and mental handicaps.

Twenty-three children and three adults, with disabilities ranging from rare genetic defects to commonly known disorders like cerebral palsy or muscular dystrophy, ride around the ring three at a time for about a half hour with the aid of 20 to 30 volunteers.

The program has 60 regular volunteers who help lead the horses, guard against riders falling off, organize the order of the riders and maintain the barn and paddocks.

Older horses are chosen carefully for their quiet demeanor and tendency not to scare easily.

Part of the North American Handicapped Riding Association, **Naples Equestrian Challenge** formed in January after breaking its affiliation with Special Equestrians in Fort Myers. The program moved to its current location on Carica Road, just off Goodlette-Frank Road North, last July.

The concept of the program is to use the rhythmic movement of a horse's stride and the warmth from the animal's back to stimulate the rider's senses, help develop a sense of balance and force the use of atrophied muscles.

"The gait of the horse simulates the movement of walking," says Sue MacDonald, the organization's president.

"We don't want it to just be a ride," she says. "We want it to be a therapeutic thing."

MacDonald's son, Sammy Lomas, was born with a rare genetic disorder. She believes Sammy reaps untold benefits from his weekly rides.

"My son -- it makes him so relaxed he falls asleep when he rides," she says.

Leslie Disque, whose 3-year-old daughter Jackie has a genetic disorder that affects her heart and respiratory system, sees similar benefits.

"When she gets up on the horse, she's relaxed and happy," Disque says, leaning against the fence, watching her daughter "back-riding" with volunteer Karen Blackwell. Some of the children who can't sit up on their own back-ride with another person. "It builds a lot of confidence. I think it's something she enjoys."

As Disque speaks, the entourage surrounding Jackie's horse walks slowly by.

"Old MacDonald had a farm, ee-i-ee-i-oh ... "

For a back-rider like Jackie, it take a volunteer to ride, a volunteer to lead the horse, and two more volunteers to walk on either side of the horse.

All of them sing quietly in unison and in sync to the clops of the hoofbeats as Jackie's head bobs a bit. She smiles and sucks her thumb.

"You see results," says the organization's treasurer Cindy Kessler. "That's what makes you feel good. At first when I started, I thought we were just giving pony rides, but then I began to see the progress."

For volunteer Darcy O'Neill, progress is what it's all about. O'Neill spends her winters in Naples, and she's always astounded at the progress she sees when she returns from her northern home in the fall.

"You don't see the hurdles people go through to start this," O'Neill says. "It looks like kids are just sitting around having a good time on a horse, but it's taken a lot to get there."

O'Neill believes in the program because it provides benefits to such a variety of disabilities.

"It gives them a form of recreation," O'Neill says. "With a child that cannot be taught, it gives them physical and mental stimulation."

For an adult who not only can be taught but also teaches herself, riding can have its benefits too. Betty Gibson is a substitute teacher in Lee County schools. A few years ago, the former avid horseback rider was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. Now, she's back in the saddle again, riding as therapy.

"It definitely makes a difference," she said. "Today I'm miserably stiff, and this will help."

Blackwell began driving to Fort Myers three years ago to volunteer. She donates her horse and riding abilities as well as her time, cleaning stalls, grooming and exercising the horses during the week. She says she does it because it makes such a difference in the riders' lives.

"For some of the riders, this is the highlight of their week," she says.

But for Blackwell, too, it's a highlight that makes a difference in her week.

"This teaches me that I'm always the one learning," she said. "The riders teach us about love, about acceptance."

For more information or to donate to the nonprofit organization, call 596-2988 or write to: **Naples Equestrian Challenge**, P.O. Box 1353, Naples, Fla. 34106.

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