

Saddle Up for Equine Therapy

BY TYLER HAYDEN

CONNIE CODY PHOTOS

Just like the center's joyful statue, those who participate in the SYV Therapeutic Riding Program gain both emotionally and physically. Not only do they become more self-confident, but their strength and coordination improve as well. And for many, just being up on a horse is pure joy.

Out on North Refugio Road, among the leafy vines of wineries and soft honks of geese from the river, is a special place where the human-horse connection runs deep.

For 30 years, the last 19 at this property it shares with the Santa Ynez Valley Equestrian Center, the Santa Ynez Valley Therapeutic Riding Program has helped people cope with and conquer their disabilities.

Through slow walks around the corral to specifically designed exercises that stimulate body and mind, staff guide their students toward discoveries of capability and strength that last a lifetime. "We're a little more than horseback riding," explained director Robin Serritslev with a smile.

Serritslev remembers the nonverbal boy who spoke his first word on a horse and now sings when he rides. The young woman with cerebral palsy whose leg and core muscles were

developed by her horse's gait, which mimics a person's stride. And the older woman with dementia who could, once up on a saddle, carry on conversations with her husband again.

It's not magic, Serritslev said. It's a unique and proven form of therapy that not only activates the spinal cord and certain parts of the brain but also hones confidence and independence.

"To be able to communicate with and gently control a large and powerful animal—it's an incredible thing," she said. "It gives them a huge sense of accomplishment."

The program has 11 horses in its care, including Funelope, a rescue; Roxy, a one-time showhorse; and Teacup, a mini. One of the program's horses was donated by former Sheriff Jim Thomas, and another is on lease from County Supervisor Peter Adam. Each is special: only one out of every 100 horses can become a therapy horse, Serritslev said. "They



Four-year-old Jayce Petersen's dad, Bryan Petersen, pushes him up a mounting ramp that will bring him level with his horse's back. As he rides around the corral, several volunteers run alongside to hold him securely in the saddle. And a good time is had by all!

pretty much have the right temperament, or they don't."

Those that do can handle instructors walking on either side of them (as prey animals, horses normally don't like to feel boxed in) and don't mind loud noises or the stable's electric lift for paralyzed students. They also know to stop when they feel their rider is losing balance, and give a nuzzle when it's needed.

Serritslev, a Cal Poly graduate and Solvang mom with three kids, has always been a "horsey girl," she said. And she's always been drawn to helping those with special needs. Her mother taught special ed; her nephew is on the autism spectrum.

It only seemed natural she would take the program's reins. The team of instructors and volunteers currently works with 59 students a week with a range of disabilities, though autism and cerebral palsy are the most common.

A doctor's release is required to participate. Half come from Lompoc, the rest from Santa Maria and the Valley. Their ages range from 3 years old to 90, and nine have been enrolled in the organization for more than a decade. "They develop really intense bonds with the horses," Serritslev said. "It just becomes family."

Serritslev recalled a recent moment to illustrate her point. One of her students, a young woman in her 30s who'd suffered multiple strokes and was confined to a wheelchair, had grown particularly close with Dooley.

When Dooley got hurt, they didn't see each other for a while. When he finally returned to the stable, he shook loose of his handlers and buried his head in her lap. Empathy is a big part of Therapeutic Riding Program's mission.

"It's important to remember that there's a lot going on in their lives and their families' lives," she said. "Doctor's appointments, therapy, surgeries—daily life can be tough."

As much as students and their families gain, the organization is deeply meaningful to its instructors and volunteers. "It really makes you grateful for the little things in life," said Serritslev, "and to have compassion for what people can contribute to the world. Because everyone has something to offer."

Before students ever climb on a saddle they sit down with program leaders to go over goals for their riding and their lives. The average lesson lasts 45 minutes, and though real and important work is being done, the place maintains a fun and relaxed atmosphere full of easy conversation and consistent encouragement.

Once a year, the team hosts a horse show, where a couple hundred people arrive to cheer on the riders. "They don't often get that," said Serritslev, explaining their students frequently miss out on the trophies and ribbons their siblings

At the annual Roundup Happy Ride (which took place at Halloween, hence volunteers in costumes), every participant who rode around the arena was awarded a trophy.



Teenager Jesse Zaragoza has been riding at SYVTRP for ten years; he rode his favorite horse, Anika, at the roundup.



Marie Stoll, a retired teacher, is also a student, one of many adults in the program.



Emmarie Wilson is mounted on her horse and ready for her ride around the arena.

Santa Ynez Valley Therapeutic Riding Program



Executive Director Robin Serritslev says she's always been a "horse girl." Given more resources, she'd love to expand the program.

Barbara and Larry had similar sentiments about their son, Kevin. "Kevin's confidence was enhanced, his posture improved, and it was so great to see him accomplish such a wonderful sport."

Tight-knit, generous, and horse-loving, the culture of the Santa Ynez Valley has embraced the Therapeutic Riding Program.

High school students regularly volunteer time, while its ten part-time staff, many of whom are retired teachers, are thoroughly dedicated to the mission. "All of them have incredible patience and compassion," said Serritslev. "And it's a very rewarding thing to do. That's why they stay so long."

Nevertheless, Serritslev is always looking for new volunteers and instructors, and she's holding a volunteer training luncheon on January 25 at 11 a.m. No horse experience is necessary, she explained, just a couple hours of availability a week.

The program has a waiting list of students and can't enroll more without more personnel and that's why volunteers are vital to the program.

The nonprofit is particularly proud of the fact that 70 percent of its students are on scholarship, which is largely made possible by the philanthropic support of Valley residents.

They're eager for help in that area, too: horses are expensive. Thinking long term, Serritslev would like to build a second stable in Santa Maria. "There's a huge population there and a lot of need, but not a lot of services," she said. She's working with Marian Regional Medical Center and they're in the development stage of two programs — therapeutic riding for their patients, and mental health programs for their residents. "I feel like we're just scratching the surface of what we can do with this," she said.

While Serritslev is looking toward the future, she's quick to note the SYV Therapeutic Riding Program owes a deep debt of gratitude to its founder, neuropsychologist Dr. Mary Ann Evans.

might have. "It's a really happy day."

Perhaps testimonials from parents tell the story best: "Jesse benefits in so many ways from therapeutic riding lessons," said his mom, Carrie. "You can see it in his face. He just lights up! It has been a very strong tool in his intervention and has allowed him to connect with people and animals on a totally different level."

Barbara and Larry had sim-

ilar sentiments about their son, Kevin. "Kevin's confidence was enhanced, his posture improved, and it was so great to see him accomplish such a wonderful sport." For ten years back in the 1990s, Evans ran the organization out of her small Ballard Canyon ranch with her own horse, a sweet Arab cross who lived to 37. She'd originally helped found the Hearts Therapeutic Equestrian Program in Santa Barbara 35 years ago, but moved north after she "fell in love with the Valley." One of her first clients was a good friend and rider who'd had an accident and become quadriplegic. "It was amazing to see that person back on a horse again," Evans recalled.

At that time there were very few services in the Santa Ynez Valley for people with disabilities. "People would tell me, 'There are no people with disabilities here,'" Evans said. "When really they were just sending them out of the Valley to schools and homes."

Working long hours on a shoestring budget, she saw 25 students a week and quickly gained a following. When she was offered the chance to move to the equestrian center, she jumped at it.

Evans remains heavily interested and invested in the psychotherapeutic opportunities that horse riding can offer. She works with veterans with PTSD and victims of brain injuries. She's also worked with the troubled youth of Los Prietos Boys Camp.

"Horses are used as mirrors of human behavior," she explained. "They help clients modulate their own responses and energy."

If a person approaches a horse too timidly or too aggressively, for instance, it will react accordingly. The same is often true when they approach other people in their everyday life. The metaphorical exercise can be quite powerful and help change behavior, Evans said.

But this kind of therapy is not just for people with disabilities, Evans stressed. It can help anyone with depression, anxiety, or stress, and it can do wonders for general interpersonal skills. (She's seen it among office colleagues and nonprofit boards.)

The program is also a means for working through tragedy and trauma, something Santa Barbara County has experienced more than its fair share of in recent years. "We're here, and we're available," Evans said.



Dr. Mary Ann Evans founded the program, seeing students at her own ranch before it moved to the SYV Equine Center.

SANTA YNEZ VALLEY THERAPEUTIC RIDING PROGRAM is located at 195 N. Refugio Rd, Santa Ynez. Those interested in helping out should call volunteer coordinator Karie McCorkle at (805) 350-2280. Email: robin.syvtrp@gmail.com Website: syvtherapeuticriding.org