

Therapeutic riding center making positive changes



Five-year-old Evan Newendorp rides the Welsh pony Bella at the WALK ON! Therapeutic Riding Center in Celina. Helping Evan and Bella stay on course are, from left to right, volunteer Michelle Reynolds, Walk On! co-founder Tara Malphrus and volunteer Linda Reith. Children are encouraged to play games and enjoy riding the horses.

By: KELLY BROEKER
Special to the Record

There are few better therapies than those received from animals. An equine facility in Celina is hoping to further that perception.

Walk On!, a non-profit organization, exposes children with disabilities to a therapy environment like no other, producing results they say are off the charts.

Eddie and Tara Malphrus, founders of Walk On! Therapeutic Riding Center, have witnessed many miracles since they started the organization three years ago.

It all began when Tara, a special education teacher in Prosper at the time, was approached by several parents encouraging her and her husband, Eddie, to start a therapeutic riding center on their 5 acres of land known as Willow Wood Ranch.

Eddie and Tara tried out the program on two students, using their own personal horses, Go-Go and Cowboy.

One of the students, Amanda, a 9-year-old girl who was diagnosed with severe and profound mental retardation, had life-altering results with the program within just a few weeks of participation.

Before Amanda began the program, her normal day at school would consist of time spent in the fetal position without eye contact, speech, or emotions. After just a few weeks in the program, Amanda reached up to pet the horse she'd just ridden.

"We all just stood there in that moment, and cried," said Eddie.

After two years on the program, Amanda was running, laughing, and even feeding herself. Amanda's parents related to Eddie and Tara that they'd brought a warm body to the facility and were given a daughter in return.

"At that point, we were all firm believers in the program", said Eddie.

The next step was joining NARHA, the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association, and becoming a part of the over 700 other therapeutic facilities around the nation who were working with NARHA.

Walk On! keeps its uniqueness though, by incorporating as much of the children's academics into the program as possible. Since it maintains a 1-to-1 teaching ratio, the program is able to focus on the specific needs of each student, whether it is arm or leg strength, balance, manners, or even reading.

Cami is a student with cerebral palsy who has benefited from her sessions physically and academically.

"At one point she needed help reading", said Eddie. "So we'd just stop the horse and say, Cami, read this sentence."

"The kids are so thrilled to be on a horse they don't even realize they're doing therapy. When we say reach for the sky, they don't know that they're actually stretching out those back muscles and strengthening their trunk and balancing. They leave all giggling, happy, and eager to come back, which is something you don't normally see with conventional therapy", continued Eddie.

The organization got its name from those two little words that the children say to get the horses to begin their journey: Walk On.

The program's mission is to reach out to children and young adults with disabilities in order to facilitate a positive change in their lives using proven therapeutic riding methods.

Some conditions treated with therapeutic riding include cerebral palsy, down syndrome, muscular dystrophy, autism, post-surgical rehabilitation, physical and emotional abuse, and "at-risk" youth.

Fall sessions are now in progress. For information, call 972-347-9616 or visit www.therapyriding.com.

Donations can be made at the above Web site to facilitate in the care of their six loving horses that make these miracles happen, Go-Go, Cowboy, Bella, Hoover, Dakota, and George.