

Let's take a ride!

by Lindsey Childress, Ada, Okla.

Riding a horse gives children and adults with emotional, mental or physical disabilities the legs to run and an equine friend that helps them learn to trust.

"The horse does the work; we just show up," said Tami Danel, Oklahoma State University special education alumna and executive director of Turning Point Ranch.

Danel began the Turning Point Ranch in 1997 at the OSU veterinary medicine facilities. After four years, Danel said she felt the program did not have room to grow or funding to continue. She made a decision to stop the program until she could find a facility with full-time availability and a way to receive adequate funding.

When OSU animal science alumna and Turning Point Ranch instructor Kristen Marcus' daughter, Briannon, was diagnosed with cerebral palsy at the age of 6 months, Marcus became interested in therapeutic riding. She said she felt Payne County could use a therapeutic riding program and spent two years trying to start a program in Stillwater, Okla.

In February 2005, Marcus met Danel, and they decided to restart the previous program. On Sept. 12, 2005, the Turning Point Ranch began its first day at the Starr Valley Stables in Stillwater. The program has two primary groups: physically and emotionally challenged individuals ages 4 and up.

In the first month of the program, they enrolled two disabled children from referrals, six to eight kids from the Payne County Youth Shelter and five students from the Stillwater Public Schools.

Natalea Watkins, OSU journalism and broadcasting alumna and board of directors member for Turning Point Ranch, has experienced the benefits of therapeutic riding. Watkins was in a car accident five years ago and was paralyzed from her chest down, giving her no muscle control in her abdomen. She became involved in therapeutic riding as part of her physical therapy to increase her muscle use.

Watkins said therapeutic riding benefits those individuals with psychological disabilities by making them feel "as tall as anyone else" when they are on horseback.

"Therapeutic riding is a very valuable type of physical therapy because the bond between a human and horse is powerful," said Watkins. "Someone whose mobility challenges are a constant reminder of powerlessness finds equality on the back of a horse. Suddenly, the disability dissolves and you have legs to run."

The Turning Point Ranch is trying to help individuals with emotional and psychological disabilities in Stillwater by reaching out to the children of the Payne County Youth Shelter.

Each week, Lindsay Radcliff, youth guidance specialist, takes the children to Turning Point Ranch for therapy. Often, the youth who participate in this opportunity have been mentally, physically or sexually abused.

Each child who comes to the youth shelter looks forward to being able to attend the sessions, said Radcliff.

"The kids can be having a terrible day, but once they get to the ranch, they forget about everything else," said Radcliff.

Shirley Lewis of Stillwater Public Schools was looking for more opportunities to provide for children with special needs and their parents. She became involved with the Turning Point Ranch and enrolled five students to attend a session each week. She plans to increase that number to 10 students in spring 2006. Currently, she is working on applications for grants that will cover the cost of the therapeutic riding sessions.

"Any opportunity that we can provide for the students with disabilities we want to offer," said Lewis. "We want to make sure that the parents have choices."

Jason Wright, an 18-year-old student at Stillwater Public Schools, attends hour-long sessions at Turning Point Ranch each week. Cindy Wright, Jason's mother, said he was diagnosed with mental retardation and multi-handicapped as a 1-year-old.

Wright said she was concerned about Jason's first session, but then was impressed and thrilled about the way he responded to the horses. She said it greatly helps his muscle development because he has to use muscles he is not required to use in everyday life. She said riding calms him and gives him an experience he would have never had if it wasn't for this program.

"It was an experience I will never forget because of the way the special needs boys reacted to the horses and how they were in awe of them," said Wright. "The boys displayed a feeling of being proud of themselves. They

had mastered a skill, and that is something rare for them because, unfortunately, they are limited in their physical strength."

She said the therapeutic riding provides an emotional type of therapy. The interaction with the horses provides a way for her son to grow and develop.

"I certainly appreciate the work Mrs. Lewis did and the efforts that went into coordinating this therapy program for the special needs kids," said Wright.

OSU accounting alumna Pam Carpenter has an autistic 16-year-old son, Luke, who participates in the therapeutic riding program through Stillwater Public Schools.

"Therapeutic riding meets stimulation needs that kids with autism have by sensory integration," said Carpenter. "It relaxes him, and he comes home very calm and more able to focus."

Therapeutic riding offers individuals with disabilities a chance to feel great about themselves and to feel they have accomplished something. It provides a kid like Jason Wright the opportunity to yell at the top of his lungs, "This is the best day, Mom! Yee-haw, pony, yee-haw!" When asked how much he enjoyed his day, he screams excitedly, "Too much!"

"As a special needs mom I was so glad to be a part of this heartfelt, first-time experience," said Cindy Wright. "To sum it all up, it was one small step for the horse and one giant leap for the special boys."

What is Therapeutic Riding?

Therapeutic riding is used to improve the well-being of an individual's life. More than 30,000 individuals with disabilities are helped each year in therapeutic riding programs through the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association. Therapeutic riding began in the 1950s in Europe, and NARHA was founded in 1969 to promote therapeutic riding in the United States and Canada.

"NARHA wants to ensure the excellence of the boards for the therapeutic riding programs across the United States," said Kaye Marks, NARHA marketing director. "The association wants to provide a wealth of knowledge to the 700 affiliated centers."

NARHA provides memberships to individuals with disabilities, family and friends of participants, instructors, therapists, administrators and individuals who want to support equine-assisted activities. Therapeutic riding centers can join and gain access to the support, promotion and education NARHA offers to its accredited centers. Centers must meet requirements prior to and after joining NARHA.

Cutlines

Jason Wright shows his excitement during a therapy session. (photo by Lindsey Childress)

Volunteers help a student during a therapeutic riding session at Turning Point Ranch. (photo by Kristen Marcus)