

RIDING HIGH

~Equine Therapy Gives Hope and Honor to the Disabled~



Photo by Hajnalka Ar dai

What if your special needs child could improve their motor skills, increase self-esteem, and learn to walk more smoothly, all while making friends and having the time of their life? Therapeutic **HORSEBACK RIDING** in Cy-Fair offers all this and more...

WRITTEN BY **LAURIE RODDY** PHOTOGRAPHY BY **DEB COLSON**



Therapy horses need to have a calm, stable temperament



SIRE Client and Volunteer tenders



Volunteers Marcus Lackey and Sharron Hipp



SIRE serves hundreds of clients each year

Cy-Fair is lucky enough to have one of the largest therapeutic equestrian centers in Texas with SIRE. Based in Hockley with sites in Spring and Fort Bend County, SIRE incorporated in 1985 with only a few horses and a handful of volunteers. After more than 20 years and a merger with Houston's Therapeutic Equestrian Center in 2000, SIRE now serves hundreds of clients each year with volunteers logging more than 23,000 hours of service in 2007.

Not Just a Trail Ride

"My daughter Erin has been taking therapeutic riding classes at SIRE for 15 years," says Millie Ann Denmark. "Erin has medical, physical, cognitive, and emotional disabilities that prevent her from doing activities typical for most 24 year olds. She doesn't have the ability to participate in other sports, but Erin can participate in horseback riding and loves the horses, people and going to the events of Special Olympics."

Therapeutic horseback riding provides people with different abilities a riding environment to attain skills and to improve function.

It includes horsemanship, learning to care for the horses, vaulting activities (gymnastics on horseback), and therapeutic carriage driving. "Therapeutic riding is taking the skills to learn to ride a horse and adapting it to that individual," says Karen Gardner, Site Director. "They want to do it in a fun and motivating atmosphere, not a classroom or clinic."

Therapy to Meet All Needs

With therapeutic horseback riding, each rider has a volunteer or group of volunteers working with them each week. They assist the client as side-walkers (providing physical and verbal support), horse leaders, designated horse person, and daily coordinators. The side-walkers work directly with each client to ensure they have the most beneficial and fun experience each week. This is when casual acquaintances become lasting friends and where deep relationships are made.

Another therapeutic opportunity is hippotherapy, which is a therapy session conducted by a licensed therapist. These clients do not

QUICK FACTS ABOUT THERAPEUTIC EQUINE CENTERS

- **NARHA** (North American Riding for the Handicapped Association, Inc.) includes centers in the U.S. and Canada
- More than **38,000** individuals participate each year
- Nearly 800 **NARHA** member centers in the U.S. and Canada
- **Moody Gardens** in Galveston started as a hippotherapy center in the mid 1980's for people with head injuries

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have control of the horse as in therapeutic riding and they are not learning how to ride. They are receiving therapy while on a horse. With more than one type of therapy, SIRE ensures that all clients' needs are met. Clients as young as 3 may participate in the hippotherapy program and clients age 5 and up can start therapeutic horseback riding.

The Benefits and Beyond

The physical and emotional benefits of horseback riding have been known for hundreds of years. The horse's movement provides stimulation to the brain and body that affects many different muscle groups. The benefits include improved muscle tone, balance, posture, coordination, motor development, and psychological well-being. But more importantly, it builds self-esteem and confidence to children and adults who have challenges the general population never have to face.

"I must emphasize what a positive impact SIRE has had on Erin's life," continues Denmark. "It's been the one constant she could look forward to for many years." Erin has participated in Special Olympics for years – a source of extreme pride for her. "She's an enthusiastic and delightful advocate for therapeutic riding and Special Olympics, inviting everyone in the grocery store, pharmacy, therapy center, doctor's office, and in desperation, even casual passersby to come watch her ride at Special Olympics," adds Denmark.

The social benefits are also immeasurable as these kids develop relationships with volunteers, staff, and of course the horses. They now have a place to go that they can call their own. They have friends, a job to do, and goals to achieve – something many of

these kids didn't have before coming to SIRE. "The environment is so much fun," says Gardner. "It's a natural environment that is outdoors with the animals and plants, making it a fun place to go to – not another clinic or rehab session. Here you're actually doing something to rehab such as riding a horse for balance or pulling on the reins for strength. You have a meaningful contact with each activity."

Fun for All

"You have a fan club or cheerleaders with the volunteers for each client," adds Gardner. "They are 100% focused on you (the client). Who wouldn't want that? Volunteers choose to be here and you can't substitute for the feeling that gives the clients."

Everyone wants an even playing field, but when a child is on crutches or in a wheelchair, they're always looking up. Put them on a horse and now they're tall, taller than everyone else. What a feeling that must be! **CFM**

LAURIE RODDY has been a writer for over 25 years. She lives in Northwest Houston and recently completed the book, "60 Hikes Within 60 Miles: Houston." She is the Active and Adventure Texas writer for Away.com..

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