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Project ASTRIDE gives people with disabilities a chance to ride

By Frank Lee

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Clare Palmquist enjoys horsing around, especially if it helps those with disabilities.

The advanced therapeutic-certified riding instructor is program coordinator of Project ASTRIDE, which is a member of the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association.

"When the horse walks, they have a four-beat gait, which translates through their back into the human pelvis in an almost identical human walking gait," said Palmquist, formerly of Sartell.

"We often find, especially with our adult and cognitive riders, they say when they get off the horse, they can walk better ... which lasts anywhere from one to five or six days."

Project ASTRIDE riders perform a variety of physical exercises and games on horseback to improve coordination, strength, flexibility and balance, according to the program's organizers.

The St. Cloud-area nonprofit provides horseback riding in the spring, summer and fall for those with disabilities so they can develop self-confidence, pride, independence and a sense of responsibility.

"If you think about a rider who has cerebral palsy, their gait may be stilted, and they are not able through their own means to walk like you and I might, but once they're on the horse, their pelvis can rotate in a more 'normal' pattern," Palmquist said.

Participants groom the horses and are involved in tacking with saddle, pad and headgear when not riding, to reinforce the bond between the person and the animal.

"We have riders who are nonverbal who become verbal to a point; they will come to the program and say their horse's name or they'll say, 'Whoa,' or pick up some of the verbal things that go along with horseback riding," she said.

Established in 1986, Project ASTRIDE leases facilities from Avon Hills Paints & Quarter Horses. ASTRIDE stands for Adapted Specialized Training and Recreation Involving Disabled Equestrians. It has seven therapy horses.

"There is physical activity for those who typically may not get much physical activity," said Palmquist, who has been a volunteer with Project ASTRIDE since 1987.

The program consists of eight one-hour sessions where participants also learn to improve their social skills during the grooming and tacking portion.

"A lot of riders' parents tell us that social portion enters into a lot of their lives in the school or the classroom, particularly with autistic children, making it easier for them to integrate with their peers," she said.

The rider's capabilities, interests and needs are matched to the trained horses while skilled volunteers

provide individual attention and instruction using adapted equipment, she said.

"The oldest rider we had was 103," said Palmquist, a 49-year-old dairy farmer from Pierz who has worked with horses for more than 30 years.

Enrollment is open to anyone with a physician's permission. Participants must typically be older than 3 and weigh, at most, 180 pounds.

The cost is \$175 for an eight-week session, but Project ASTRIDE also offers private and semiprivate sessions on a limited availability.

"We have a mounting ramp and a mounting block that puts the rider on the level of the horse's back, so that it's a much less intimidating experience to mount the horse," Palmquist said.

A recent CentraCare grant allowed the purchase of a battery-powered lift that can raise a person high enough out of a wheelchair to mount the horse.

Volunteers ages 16 and older are needed to assist riders.

"Part of the reason why the program works so well is because there is an actual connection that happens between the horse and rider, much like that between a dog and its owner," she said.

"There's something just so elegant and so enchanting about a horse, watching them run, that it just gets to our basic of nature of wanting to have a connection with them."

Additional Facts

Who can participate

Individuals with the following disabilities commonly participate and benefit from equine-facilitated therapy and activities:

- » Amputations
- » Attention deficit disorder
- » Autism
- » Brain injuries
- » Cardiovascular accident/stroke
- » Cerebral palsy
- » Deafness
- » Down syndrome
- » Emotional disabilities
- » Learning disabilities
- » Mental retardation
- » Multiple sclerosis
- » Muscular dystrophy
- » Spina bifida
- » Spinal cord injuries
- » Visual impairment

Source: Project ASTRIDE

Contact

For more information about Project ASTRIDE, call 468-2524, e-mail info@astride.org or visit www.astride.org.
