

# SPECIAL HORSES HELP SPECIAL PEOPLE

## THERAPEUTIC HORSEBACK RIDING BENEFITS ALL INVOLVED



Josh, Kathi, and Heather Parker of Hooves for Harmony offer love, patience and horse-savvy learning experiences for children. Sisco the Horse cooperates earnestly as 2-year-old Ansel takes a ride.

**H**eather Parker, owner and founder of Hooves for Harmony in Anderson, is deeply passionate about therapeutic horseback riding. When asked how Hooves for Harmony has changed her life, she answers with passion, "How hasn't it changed my life? It's what I live for and it's what I'm put here to do."

Hooves for Harmony is a non-profit organization, operating since 2006. The organization serves special needs children, offering them an opportunity to ride horses and experience the outdoors on Saturday mornings at no

charge. Hooves for Harmony manages to break even financially through donations and an amazing group of dedicated volunteers.

Heather had horse fever as a child and grew up taking riding lessons every weekend, and participating in horse camps all summer. She says her mother was shocked to find out that at summer camp Heather had volunteered to get up at 5 a.m. each morning to help get the horses ready. Heather laughs as she recalls, "That was heaven on earth for me!"

Heather is extremely dedicated to her horses, most of which have been rescued from abusive situations. One horse, Rocky, was severely abused and very fearful of people when she rescued him. Heather spent two years in intensive training with Rocky to rebuild his trust. Many people would have given up when faced with such a challenging task, but Heather devoted herself to Rocky's recovery. She was rewarded as Rocky grew to understand that Heather was trustworthy, and that he was safe with her. Today Rocky is her best horse for kids' therapy. 27 ▶

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Heather has watched a rescue therapy horse working with a severely abused boy who had anger issues and had been enacting negative behaviors. After several weeks of riding lessons, his foster family witnessed a dynamic change as the boy learned to express himself in healthy ways.

One 11-month-old client began riding with Heather sitting behind him. He had no ability to sit up, so Heather held him up as they rode together, twice a week at first. Within two months he was sitting up by himself, holding on and looking around. "The physical therapists couldn't believe it," Heather says.

Heather shared that a few children in particular run across her lawn every Saturday morning yelling her name and throwing their arms around her neck.

Their open gratitude provides the satisfaction Heather

gets for the work she puts into the program (while also working a full-time job).

Therapeutic horseback riding greatly benefits people with physical, emotional and developmental challenges. Riding promotes blood flow, strength and balance. A horse's gait imitates that of a person, so people who aren't able to walk can feel the back-and-forth movement while riding.

Handi-Riders of Northern California Inc. in Oroville is a horse therapy program established in 1981, serving children and adults with special needs. They are a Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH Intl.) member and premier accredited operating center. Their fall session offers a six-week group lesson series that begins September 9, with a volunteer training on September 7.

Sid McBride, program coordinator and instructor for Handi-Riders, has many stories involving memorable moments with riders. She has seen a child speak for the first time or become significantly more vocal when around the horses. "It is an occurrence that is often commonplace in our industry and sometimes I forget how significant it can be," she says. Doctors, rehabilitation specialists, physical and speech therapists recognize

## Resources:

### Handi-Riders, Oroville, CA

www.handi-riders.org, (530) 533-5333.

### Hooves for Harmony, Anderson, CA.

www.hoovesforharmony.org, (530) 410-4422.

### Stable Hands, Yreka, CA.

www.stablehands.org, (530) 842-3082.

Coming up: Join renowned horse trainer Charles Wilhelm for a horsemanship clinic at the Cottonwood Creek Equestrian Center in Cottonwood on October 26. All proceeds benefit Hooves for Harmony. Call Hooves for Harmony or visit their website for details.

this significance and often refer clients to Handi-Riders.

The horses are highly qualified and enjoy their work. Sid has often witnessed how incredibly patient and in-tune a horse can be to its rider. One woman's dying wish was to ride a horse. Her family brought her to Handi-Riders and watched as the staff assisted her frail body onto the horse, LaChuba. Sid says, "The process of getting her on the horse was quite long and slow, and LaChuba never moved. Throughout the entire ride he maintained a slow and steady rhythm and never took a misstep."

Horse therapy has much to offer all involved. Riders benefit directly with improvements in speech, body control and behavior. Instructors and volunteers bear witness to these small miracles over time. And, as Sid shares, "horses have an additional sense that allows them to achieve amazing things with a rider." ■



Author Greta Hanelt lives in Mount Shasta and enjoyed volunteering for two years at Stable Hands, a therapeutic horseback riding non-profit in Yreka, CA. She now gives her two toddlers "horseback" rides around the house instead.



Handi-Riders student Ben Jensen, age 11, rides Penny, an American Quarter Horse cross.



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