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Horse therapy program helps kids with disabilities

By Debbie Swartz • dswartz@gannett.com • April 5, 2010, 7:45 pm

The dream of giving children in need a chance to receive beneficial therapy might seem like a long road to travel, but for Catherine Markosky, a mother of two special needs boys, it was a wish quickly brought to life.

"I've just seen so many kids benefit from this," she said.

The therapy, funded by Markosky's Southern Tier Alternative Therapies, takes place in stables throughout Greater Binghamton. Called Riding Connection, the program offers hippotherapy, therapeutic riding and riding lessons to children ages 2 to 18.

Started in 2007, the nonprofit has grown tremendously, Markosky said. Funding includes a \$12,000 United Way Venture grant and \$6,000 -this year from the Family Support Services Fund of the state's Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities.

In 2008, STAT awarded 120 sessions of equine therapy and in 2009, that number jumped to 560 sessions to children with special needs, including those with [autism](#), cerebral palsy, genetic conditions and Down syndrome.

"We were able to do this from multiple donors and fundraisers," Markosky said.

The idea

Markosky, of Owego, knows what it's like to see children benefit from a program not covered by health [insurance](#). Her sons Max, 6, and Mason, 9, both took part in horse-based therapies. While her family could afford the trips to get them, she knew many others could not. Thus was born the idea of STAT.

"It's quite expensive to do it year-round. I knew there were a lot of people who weren't able to afford it," Markosky said. "This way, we can have programs where people don't have to pay out-of-pocket."

So far, three local stables accept the vouchers funded by STAT: Stable Movements in the Town of Chenango, Harmony Hill Ranch in Binghamton and Fagnoli Farm in Apalachin. Three more stables are looking to offer the services as well. Before the stables were allowed to participate, they were visited by a horse handler and horse rescuer to make sure they were up to par, Markosky said. Partnering barns accept the vouchers presented by clients and then are reimbursed by STAT.

"Every individual barn runs its own program," she said.

STAT is funded by grants and donations. It has seven fundraising events planned this year, including one in this Friday and another in May. Along with 10 board members, the program has 30 volunteers as well as Binghamton University interns who take part in supporting the nonprofit's mission.

"They're helping us with our mailings and getting our posters out," Markosky said.

The therapy



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The benefits of horse-based therapy are varied, said physical therapist Beth Parks, who works with clients from STAT.

The warmth of a horse relaxes a rider's muscles, she said, while the movement of the horse helps with strength building and sensory perception. When a client sits astride a horse, his posture automatically improves, Parks said.

"It builds their trunk strength and opens their airways for breathing," she said.

The gait of a horse also mimics the gait of a person, meaning the rider will gain strength by the side-to-side, up-and-down, and back-and-forth motions.

For Lucas Horton, 5, of Johnson City, getting a chance to ride his favorite mare, Saru, makes his day.

"He doesn't mess around when it comes to riding horses," said his father, Jack Horton.

Lucas, who rides once a week, has had dramatic improvement in his sensory orientation. Last year, he couldn't walk up and down the stairs, but now he's a stair-climbing pro, said his mother, Stacy Horton.

"It's amazing what it does," she said.

Madison Smith, 2 1/2, has been through a lot in the past six months. Diagnosed with a brain tumor at 6 months of age, she suffered a stroke in 2009. The little girl rides rescue horse Rusty to help her strengthen her muscles so she can sit up independently, said her mother, Nicole Smith of the Town of Binghamton.

"She wouldn't want to get off him," she said.

Markosky said she had similar experiences with her sons, which is what made her want to provide others with the opportunity.

"My son Mason wouldn't be walking today if it weren't for the horse riding," she said. "He couldn't even sit up when he began riding a horse."

Newest addition

Last fall, STAT developed a program for an at-risk youth program at the Binghamton Boys & Girls Club. Called the Promise Project, teenagers will volunteer on Thursdays and Fridays, beginning this week at Harmony Hill. They will learn barn chores and horse handling, and then take part in activities that promote team-building, self-confidence and social skills. During the summer, the teenagers take part in the Riding Connection program, Markosky said.

"We kind of meld both of the programs during the summertime," she said.

While they get experience volunteering, participants also leave with knowledge of careers -- such as physical therapists and veterinarians -- that they might not ordinarily learn about.

The teenagers also get a chance to work with those who have disabilities, helping them receive beneficial therapy.

"They bond with the kids," Markosky said.

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