

RIDING

FOR HOPE

Therapeutic riding program
enriches the lives of adults and
children with special needs

By Robin Roenker / Photos by Jonathan Palmer



riding for hope

The smile on 9-year-old Mahalia “Hallie” Adams said it all.

Yes, officially, she was in the middle of a physical therapy session. But in another very real way, she was simply a girl basking in the thrill of a horseback ride on a sunny afternoon.

That’s the magic of Central Kentucky Riding for Hope (CKRH), where on any given day, you may see a young rider with spina bifida or cerebral palsy building her muscle strength, an adult regaining mobility following a stroke, a veteran healing from physical injuries or post-traumatic stress disorder, or even high school kids working through anxiety or aggression issues — all thanks to the patience and power of horses.

“All of the therapists at CKRH are phenomenal. They make it so much fun,” said Ginger Adams, Hallie’s mom, who drives Hallie for therapy each week from their home in Carlisle, Kentucky, to Central Kentucky Riding for Hope’s headquarters: a 35-acre tract at the back of the Kentucky Horse Park.

Hallie was diagnosed at 6 months of age with periventricular leukomalacia, which is linked to cerebral palsy, as a result of a stroke in utero. Her life has been a mix of physical and occupational therapy ever since. But her hippotherapy sessions — the technical term for the use of a horse’s movements to aid occupational or physical therapy — at CKRH are by far her favorites.

During a recent session, physical therapist Lisa Harris walked alongside Hallie, who was riding CKRH’s horse Lincoln. She led Hallie in movements to help strengthen her motor control and core.

“After you have a ride, you can feel it in your core, you feel it in your abs. While my clients are on the horse, I’m working with their posture and core stability,” said

Harris, a therapist with Cardinal Hill Rehabilitation Hospital who has offered weekly therapy sessions at CKRH since 2002. “The horse takes about 100 steps a minute, so if I have my client on for 10 minutes, they’re getting 1,000 repetitions to those muscles in their body. We can’t reproduce that [level of intensity] on a ball or any other equipment that we have in a traditional therapy setting.”

Ginger Adams has seen improvement in Hallie’s handwriting and fine motor control as well as her agility walking with her walker following her sessions at CKRH. But the benefits aren’t only physical.

“She loves the interaction with the horses,” Adams said. “It’s not just good for her body but also for her mind and her soul.”

Serving an array of needs

Central Kentucky Riding for Hope is celebrating its 34th year of assisting both children and adults working to overcome an array of physical, emotional, or mental challenges.

While it is an independent, non-profit agency, CKRH’s close ties with the Kentucky Horse Park go back to its beginnings, when Dr. Peter Bosomworth, then chancellor of the University of Kentucky Medical Center, led a core group that approached Rusty Chevront, then di-



Executive director Pat Kline: “...what happened sort of exceeded everyone’s expectations.”

rector of the KHP, about allowing them to give therapeutic riding a trial run at the park.

“And what happened sort of exceeded everyone’s expectations. So, the program grew, and then it grew a little more. And then eventually the group made its headquarters in an old tobacco barn at the top of the hill,” said Pat Kline, who came on board as the CKRH director in 2002.

But working from the barn meant riding sessions could

only be held seasonally, when the weather was neither too hot nor too cold for the horses and the riders. The group dreamed of building an indoor riding arena so that sessions could continue year-round.

“It was frustrating for the therapists to see their clients lose all the progress they’d made over the winter and have to start again from the beginning each spring,” Kline said.

The group’s dream was realized in 2009, when through a capital campaign they built a new \$4.1 million facility — complete with indoor riding arena, classrooms, conference room, and barn — on property



Physical therapist Lisa Harris greets her patient, Zoe Lovell, before her riding session.

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CENTRAL KENTUCKY RIDING FOR HOPE

CKRH actively seeks new volunteers and welcomes both cash and in-kind donations to support its mission. Its largest annual fundraiser, Night of the Stars, a gala event and silent auction, will be held at the Keeneland Entertainment Center on June 20. For more information or for tickets go to CKRH.org.

at the back of the Horse Park, which had been donated to them by the state. (A Scott County community development grant enabled the agency to finish the final stages of the building's interior in 2012.)

"The actuality of where we are today is even bigger than we dreamed," said Nancy Herring, CKRH's retired first director, who still volunteers weekly with the agency.

Kline credits much of the agency's growth and success to support from Lexington's equine community, noting that CKRH's food, hay, farrier, and veterinary services are donated to them, while area Thoroughbred farms and equine hospitals have been active supporters at CKRH's annual fundraising events.

Today CKRH is a buzzing operation with a multi-pronged mission that requires a staggeringly large — and dedicated — army of volunteers along with a carefully selected team of patient, steady horses.

"Right at this moment it takes 187 volunteers every week to support our current programming," Kline said, noting that the agency has more than 560 active volunteers on its roster in addition to a staff of seven full-time and two part-time employees.

CKRH currently uses 28 horses and five ponies across an array of breeds that include miniature horses, Thoroughbreds, draft horses, Quarter Horses, and several Norwegian Fjords. Most are leased for \$1 a year from their owners.

Last year, the agency provided 2,900 therapy sessions across four main areas of service:

- Hippotherapy, one-on-one sessions led by a physical or occupational therapist
- Therapeutic riding, which has similar goals to hippotherapy but can be done in small groups and is led by one of CKRH's Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship (PATH)-certified instructors
 - The Stables, a nontraditional school for middle and high school students run in partnership with Fayette County Public Schools
 - And a variety of programs for military veterans, which are offered in partnership with the Wounded Warriors Project; the U.S. National Guard's Resiliency Program; St. James Place, a transitional home for veterans; and Fayette County's new Veterans Treatment Court program, which offers



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Hallie Adams shows her love for her mount, Lincoln, whom she rides once a week.

rehabilitation to veterans with substance abuse or mental health issues.

CKRH also partners routinely with community agencies including the Bluegrass Rape Crisis Center and Hospice of the Bluegrass to offer specialized programs for their clients.

While there are thousands of therapeutic riding centers across the country, only those like CKRH, which meet the industry's most stringent safety and training procedures, are awarded Premier accreditation from the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship (PATH) International, Kline said.

Success stories abound

It takes only one trip to CKRH's riding facility to feel the importance of the agency's mission — and the way it's changing lives every day.

There's proof on the face of 4-year-old Zoe Lovell, who doesn't let spina bifida dim her 100-watt smile — or the word "therapy" even enter her mind — as she proudly tells everyone she passes in the hall about "her" horse named Lincoln and how she can't wait to ride him.

"Sometimes they'll have her practice

reaching by picking up bows around the arena and placing them in Lincoln's hair," said her mom, Hillary Smith of Versailles. "It makes the therapy so fun for her."

There are small milestones, such as when 5-year-old Piper Nealey bravely met her occupational therapist Becky Johnson's request to ride her horse Chico facing backward, in order to make balancing on the horse even more challenging. "That's huge for her," she said. "She doesn't

like to float or ever be in that position."

And there are big milestones as well, like when 15-year old freshman Hunter Fields openly credits his time at CKRH's nontraditional school The Stables — and specifically working with and around the horses there — for helping "tone down [his] anger issues."

Or when 16-year-old sophomore Caitlyn Burberry says working with horses at The Stables has helped ease her anxiety. "I feel like I've gotten to where I can talk to people now. I'm more open about myself instead of closed down," she said.

"Most of our students here have either been bullied in school or they have been the bullier," said Brian McIntyre, administrative dean for The Stables program, which is a partnership between CKRH and Fayette County Public Schools. "The horses bring a calming effect that really ties the students together."

Instructors at The Stables work to teach the children to use the horses as a mirror of their own behavior — and how they can modify it to improve their relationships with others.

"The horses put the students in real time," said Lisa Swanson, CKRH's equine

trainer. Swanson works on training CKRH's horses year-round and conducts internships with The Stables students offering them the chance to take on extra equine training and care responsibilities. "Most of these kids have zero social skills. They don't see the world outside of themselves. So the horse is a great metaphor. If they're feeling frustrated, the horse is going to get frustrated. When that happens, we can ask them to think of ways to approach the horse differently — which can translate in how they approach other people. It's about building life skills," she said.

In some instances the therapy at CKRH has literally been life-saving. Participants in the new Fayette County Veterans Treatment Court program, which launched last year to help rehabilitate veterans with addictions or mental health issues, are required to do sessions at CKRH when they graduate to stage two of the treatment. One veteran in the program wrote CKRH to say that — after years of addiction, a near-death overdose and jail time — he entered the six-week Veterans Treatment program "skeptical" about what it could offer. "But I found myself surprised at the emotional connection that I experienced with my horse, Rhett Butler. I found myself facing a different level of confidence that I hadn't felt for a long time," he wrote. This veteran is now sober and gainfully employed.

At times, CKRH therapeutic riding clients have been former adult riders who've suffered traumatic brain injuries or strokes. For them CKRH is able to bring back the gift of riding.

"These are folks who were probably thinking they would never ride again, but they come here, and we have the horses and the equipment and the instructors to do it. We can make it happen. And I think it shows them, 'If this is possible, what are my other possibilities? What else can I do? What else can I explore?'" said Jenny Jackson, CKRH's lead instructor.

And for the younger riders CKRH offers a chance to feel in charge.

"For the children who come here, I love that CKRH allows them to be able to take ownership of something," Jackson said. "Able-bodied children have swimming lessons or basketball or they go to camp. I want our riders to be able to say, 'I'm going horseback riding.' It becomes their 'thing' to call their own."

"When our riders come out here and get on their horse, I ask them, 'Who is the boss?' and then I say, 'You are. You are the boss. This is your horse. This is your team,' " Jackson said. "It's so empowering for them, and it's not something they get to hear that often." **KM**



Trainer and instructor
Lisa Swanson: "It's about
building life skills."

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