



A moment of connection between Vinceremos Therapeutic Riding Center's pony Robin Hood and 12-year-old Brenton Hallenbeck at the center in Loxahatchee, Fla.

PHOTO: TRACY EMANUEL

HORSES OF *HOPE* AND *JOY*

BY ROBIN ROENKER

Therapy horses and ponies bring smiles, comfort, strength, and healing to the communities they serve.

On a recent morning, Susan Guinan did her best to comfort a crying mother, who had come to [Vinceremos Therapeutic Riding Center](#) in Loxahatchee, Fla., in search of hope for her two-year-old son, who was not yet able to sit up, crawl, or walk.

"It just pulls at your heartstrings. Parents come here looking for just some little hope, some little inspiration for their child," said Guinan, Vinceremos's chief operating officer.

The best part of Guinan's job is that she specializes in delivering such hope—and small miracles—not only to children but teens and adults as well, who are working to overcome a physical impairment, injury, or cognitive or emotional challenge.

Vinceremos, a [USEF/United States Paraequestrian Association Center of Excellence](#), is just one of nearly 900 equine therapy centers certified by [PATH \(Professional](#)

[Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship\) International](#), which estimates that more than 66,000 children and adults gain emotional or physical strength through the healing power of horses every year.

Across the country, at PATH-certified centers such as [Ride On](#) in Chatsworth, Calif.; [Wheatland Farm](#) in Purcellville, Va.; or [Central Kentucky Riding for Hope](#) in Lexington, Ky., clients use interaction with horses to overcome an array of personal obstacles—from addiction or post-traumatic stress disorder to physical injuries or social/behavioral challenges.

Riders at Vinceremos range from small children working on their core strength and balance to elite-level riders preparing to represent the United States at next year's Special Olympics World Summer Games, set to be held March 14-21 in the United Arab Emirates.

Every day, through her office window, Guinan sees clients conquering once-out-of-reach milestones thanks to their work with Vinceremos's 20 therapy horses, whether through therapeutic horseback riding, equine-assisted learning, hippotherapy (which incorporates horses into therapy led by licensed medical professionals, such as physical therapists, speech therapists, or occupational therapists), or other equine-assisted activities.

The center uses an array of breeds and sizes of horses and ponies—including Quarter Horses and Percherons as well as [Welsh ponies](#), Halflinger ponies, a Westphalian, and others—depending on the size of the rider and their specific therapy needs.

"I know that we can make a difference," Guinan said. "When you put a child who isn't yet mobile on a pony and put their hands on the rump and tell the pony to walk on, we're teaching their core muscles how to rock—the same movement children make before they take off crawling across the floor. And with time, they get it, and they take off."

She points to success stories like five-year-old Jacob Bersharat, who was born with epilepsy and began equine therapy at Vinceremos as a three-year-old, when he wasn't yet able to hold his head up on his own. "Even getting the helmet on him when he started was next to impossible," Guinan said.



Encounters with horses and ponies, as in this lesson at Vinceremos Therapeutic Riding Center in Loxahatchee, Fla., can improve strength and balance and teach life skills, including confidence, trust, responsibility, and relationship-building.

PHOTO: TRACY EMANUEL





Above: A visit from Shades of Blue Ranch's Hawk brings delight and prompts memories.
 Right: "We make sure everyone gets a visit, but sometimes the horse lets you know there's someone in particular they want to go to," said Debbie Garcia-Bengochea, the education director at Gentle Carousel Miniature Therapy Horses.



"Vinceremos changed Jacob's life," said Ady Bersharat, mother of Jacob, 5. "Working with the horses there has helped build his strength and posture. Jacob is non-verbal, but when he is riding, he laughs and makes so many sounds of joy."



Now, Jacob can ride sitting without support and eagerly awaits his sessions with Vinceremos's hippotherapy horses, including Robin Hood, a bay pony with, as the center puts it, "the perfect combination of good nature and strength."

"Vinceremos changed Jacob's life. Now he is walking and sometimes running," said his mother, Ady Bersharat. "Working with the horses there has helped build his strength and posture. Jacob is non-verbal, but when he is riding, he laughs and makes so many sounds of joy."

Breaking Down Barriers

Their physical movements aside, just what it is about horses that makes them such ideal therapy partners—even in unmounted settings—is hard to quantify precisely, though numerous peer-reviewed research studies have tried (including several that have found horses to be especially beneficial in helping adults and children with autism).

"There's just something really special about these animals. They are such sensitive, soulful creatures," said Kaye Marks, PATH International's director of marketing and communications. "Horses have this impactful quality about them, and you just feel good when you're around them."

"Horses are non-judgmental. They only see the you that you present," agreed Guinan. As a result, they seem to have a way of breaking down barriers and reaching clients in ways that human therapists alone can't.

"We often hear stories about children who had been nonverbal, who speak their first words when they're riding on a horse," said Marks.

Even through unmounted encounters with the horses—such as grooming, feeding, or leading them on walks—clients can be

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Learn more about the USEF/USPEA Centers of Excellence at usef.org/compete/disciplines/para-equestrian/para-dressage-programs-forms/centers-of-excellence

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taught life skills, including confidence, trust, responsibility, and relationship-building. Many centers have specific programs for veterans coping with PTSD, for example, in which their work with horses helps serve as a springboard for facing the demands of their normal, daily lives.

At Vinceremos, Guinan was taken aback recently when a father began to cry after she sought him out to compliment his 13-year-old son, who had been volunteering at the center daily over the summer.

“I told him what an amazing help his son had been and said he must be incredibly proud of how helpful and respectful he is,” Guinan recalled. “And, through tears, he said, ‘You are the exception. He is in trouble at school. Everywhere else, I hear the opposite of what you just described.’ But our horses gave that father the chance to see his son in a different light—and to see that he did know how to behave, he just needed to be in the right situation to make those choices.”

Small Size, Big Hearts

Of course, not all therapy horses come in big packages. With their adorable scaled-down stature, miniature therapy horses are stars at providing emotional support and a reason to smile everywhere they go—whether meeting patients in hospitals and nursing homes or sharing a moment of hope in towns reeling from a recent trauma.

The 19 horses at [Gentle Carousel Miniature Therapy Horses](#), based in Gainesville, Fla., have visited survivors and first responders following mass shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Conn., at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Fla., and at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., among others. They’ve been on site to comfort families after natural disasters, as well, including Hurricane Irma, tornadoes in Moore, Okla., and fires in Gatlinburg, Tenn. In all, the nonprofit organization visits some 25,000 adults and children each year.

“We do a lot of work with children’s hospitals and with hospice,” said Debbie Garcia-Bengochea, Gentle Carousel’s education director. “One little girl asked to have a tea party with our horses as her last request. So all the horses came dressed in tuxedos and her cousins came wearing princess dresses. Sometimes you’re really just trying to make a memory—not just for the patient, but for the whole family.”

And it’s not just children who respond so profoundly. Gentle Carousel’s Magic—an American Miniature Horse and member of the [USEF/EQUUS Foundation Horse Stars Hall of Fame](#)—always “seems to find the person in the room who needs her most,” Garcia-Bengochea said.



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Opposite: Hawk gets plenty of love on his rounds at an assisted-living facility in Illinois.

Above: “The horses just seem to be able to reach residents more than humans can,” said Carol Swinford (shown), owner of Shades of Blue Ranch in Hebron, Ill. “They give us a way of connecting with them.”

During one visit at an assisted-living program, as Magic approached, a female resident said, "It's a horse! It's beautiful!" The staff was brought to tears, as those were the first words they'd heard her speak in their years of caring for her.

"We make sure everyone gets a visit, but sometimes the horse lets you know there's someone in particular they want to go to," said Garcia-Bengochea. "During one visit Magic kept wanting to go over to this little boy who was sitting by himself. It turns out that he had just found out his cancer had come back. The horses always pick up on what's going on."

In addition to their medical facility visits, Gentle Carousel's horses also do outreach to promote literacy and anti-bullying. (Their horse Circus, who is spotted, even has his own book to promote kindness. After reading it together in class, students take turns coloring in his spots with washable paint while sharing a positive message about a classmate.)

Many times, a visit from a miniature therapy horse allows nursing home residents a chance to recall and talk about fond memories of their own beloved horses and ponies, said Carol Swinford, owner of [Shades of Blue Ranch](#) in Hebron, Ill., which raises both American Miniatures and Falabellas. "The horses just seem to be able to reach residents more than humans can. They give us a way of connecting with them," she said. Shades of Blue also sometimes welcomes residents from nearby assisted-living facilities to visit their ranch in person—even allowing them to help out with the horses' care. "There are wheelchairs and walkers all over the place, but they're having the time of their lives helping put food in the manger and hay in the stalls," Swinford said.

In Kentucky, [Patrick the Miniature Horse](#) (aka GTR Patricks Vindicator)—a fellow member of the [USEF/Equus Foundation Horse Stars Hall of Fame](#)—also has a knack for making people's day. His owner, 21-year-old college student Sarah Schaaf, has been competing and showing Patrick on the American Miniature Horse Association circuit since she was five. But she realized Patrick also has the perfect temperament to do therapy—"He is the most calm horse I've ever been around," she said—and she began doing therapy visits with him in 2014.

"On multiple occasions, we've had nurses say that Patrick's visits are the first times they've seen their patients smile," Schaaf said. "And they tell us the patients' moods and outlook continue to improve after he's been there." ✨



PHOTOS: DEBBIE GARCIA-BENGOCHEA

Opposite: Scout from Gentle Carousel Miniature Therapy Horses visited the Gatlinburg, Tenn., community in 2016 after fatal wildfires ravaged the town.

Above: Magic from Gentle Carousel Miniature Therapy Horses in Orlando, Fla., after the Pulse nightclub mass shooting there in 2016.

Left: "Sometimes you're really just trying to make a memory—not just for the patient, but for the whole family,"

Gentle Carousel's Debbie Garcia-Bengochea said of visits like this one.