

# Horse and Buddy: Kids Moving on Horses



Danielle Lester on Ladybug.



Thomas Zahn on Greyson with side-walker Nancy Brouthers.



Lauren Atwell on Wags, with father, Peter Atwell.



Executive Director Janet Mason and Volunteer Coordinator Sharee Liles.

By Samantha Hartford

**D**anielle Lester has a grueling schedule. Each week, the five-year-old spends hours in occupational and physical therapy. Two years ago, she added therapeutic riding to her routine, and her dad says it has made all the difference.

## HOW RIDING HELPS

Danielle was born with agenesis of the corpus callosum (ACC) and partial cerebral palsy. ACC is a birth defect in which the structure that connects the two hemispheres of the brain (the corpus callosum) is partially or completely absent.

As Danielle's dad, Darrell, noticed, therapeutic riding has more joint input than other therapies. The motion of the horse mimics the sway of a person's hips as they walk, which can stimulate the spinal cord in ways that other therapies can't. Because of regular therapeutic riding, Danielle's strength has improved a lot, and she now has more flexibility in her walking. She enjoys the fellowship with the other riders, and enjoys talking to the volunteers that her dad calls "special." Especially when they are teenagers—Danielle loves the "big kids."

Now Danielle is outgoing and talkative, although her parents used to have to push her to "use her words." Being around horses has helped her develop more self-confidence. As Laura Driver, mother of another Horse and Buddy rider, points out, "Horses are good for kids—there is a really special connection between animals and children."

## NOT A PONY RIDE

Routine is very important to Danielle. Saturday mornings at Horse and Buddy are a large part in that routine. She gets very excited when she knows it's time to go ride. But these are no "pony rides." The children at Horse and Buddy work just as hard (mentally and physically) as the horses and the all-volunteer staff do. Under the direction of instructors certified by the NAHRA, Danielle and other riders follow directions and perform physically challenging tasks. To become NARHA-certified, each instructor must put in twenty-five hours in six months, pass written tests, and attend a four-day session at NAHRA Headquarters in Denver, with evaluations of their progress.

Leading this program is Executive Director Janet Mason. She has been involved

with Horse and Buddy since 2001, when there were just four children riding in the program. Now there are 35. In the last six years, Horse and Buddy has been at three different farms, has become an NARHA member program, and has officially become a non-profit organization.

## A WONDERFUL GIFT

Not having a place of their own has been a challenge for Horse and Buddy. Many of the farms where they have been allowed to hold their lessons do not have covered arenas, so the twice-weekly lessons were at the mercy of the weather. In 2006, 30 percent of scheduled rides were cancelled due to weather. Danielle's dad says there have been times when they have missed as many as three weeks in a row because it was either too hot or raining, and consistency is crucial to the therapies these children receive.

Fortunately, Horse and Buddy recently received a wonderful gift. An anonymous donor has given them 35 acres of land in New Hill, close to where they are currently riding. As they begin Phase One of developing this land, they will build a covered arena, a feed room, and bathroom facilities. Phase Two will add a ten-stall barn and an office.

Because Horse and Buddy has always been housed at facilities that are used primarily for other equestrian endeavors, their program has been limited to four hours of instruction per week. Once the facility is built, they will be able to operate 36 hours a week. The construction of a wheelchair ramp will mean that they can accommodate adult riders, which they are currently unable to do.

When she first volunteered with Horse and Buddy, Janet had every intention of returning to the corporate world, but this has become her passion, and she gives it all she has. Eventually she hopes to make Horse and Buddy her full-time job. *h&h*

*Samantha Hartford, a life-long rider and advocate for animals large and small, has served on the staff of the North Carolina State School of Veterinary Medicine for more than 10 years.*

Photographs by Samantha Hartford

## HORSEBACK RIDING: A LONG HISTORY OF HEALING

**T**herapeutic riding has a long history. There is documentation of individuals exploring the therapeutic benefits of horsemanship as far back as 600 BC. The first modern study of this topic goes back to 1875. A French physician named Cassaign prescribed riding for his patients believing that it would benefit individuals with such issues as neurological disorders, joint pain, immobility, and balance issues.

Because of the unique bond often formed between humans and animals, people throughout the ages have recognized the importance of riding for people with special needs. Therapeutic Horseback Riding came to both the United States and Canada in 1960, with the formation of the Community Association of Riding of the Disabled. In the US, riding for the disabled developed as a form of recreation and to motivate education, as well as for its therapeutic benefits. The North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA), founded in 1969, serves as an advisory body to the various riding-for-the-disabled groups across the US and its neighboring countries. NARHA provides safety guidelines and training, certifies therapeutic riding instructors, accredits therapeutic riding centers according to its own high standards, disseminates information and offers low-cost insurance to its member organizations.

## HOW YOU CAN HELP

**"V**olunteers are the heart of the Horse and Buddy program," says Executive Director Janet Mason. "We are a registered 501(c) 3 non-profit corporation that exists to help people with special needs improve balance, muscle tone, motor skills, and self-esteem. We are also a member of the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association ([www.narha.org](http://www.narha.org)), and plan to become a premier accredited center. But maybe, most importantly, we are a group of children and volunteers who have a fabulous time riding every Saturday and Monday. And we rely on the donations of time, funds, and materials to make the program work. So we hope you'll join us; there are many ways you can help."

**VOLUNTEER!** Horse and Buddy is a labor-intensive program. Some children require two side-walkers in addition to the person leading the horse. A Saturday morning with four riders each of three hours, therefore, requires 36 volunteer hours, not counting the instructor.

**BUILD:** Volunteers also will be needed to assist in building the new covered arena and barn.

**DONATE FUNDS** and/or materials for building the covered arena and barn; as well as necessary items such as fencing materials, feed buckets, or a tractor.

**DONATE A HORSE:** not every horse has what it takes to be a therapeutic riding mount. You can talk with Janet about what she looks for in a horse.

For more information about the program or volunteering, contact:  
**HORSE AND BUDDY**

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