

# CHANGING LIVES ONE TROT AT A TIME

For the past 10 years, the folks at the Glenoak Therapeutic Riding Center have helped disabled individuals reach their greatest mental and physical potential through the practice of equine-assisted therapy.

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Photography: [ANNETTE MCPHERSON PHOTOGRAPHY AND DESIGN]

**Winston Churchill once said, "There is something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man." It's a quote that speaks volumes at one local organization, especially through the efforts and actions of its volunteers.**

The Glenoak Therapeutic Riding Center sits in the heart of Flour Bluff and conducts weekly classes for more than 100 students enrolled in the Equine Sharing Program. The nonprofit program specializes in the rehabilitation of children and adults of all ages with physical, mental, emotional and learning disabilities.

The program also wants to make sure that everyone who wants to attend classes can ride; the center holds fundraisers and offers scholarships to those in need.

The center's founder, Charlene Thomas, says she decided to start the program after she saw a real need to give back to the handicapped. "I have a degree in psychology, and I felt this community needed some type of activity for people with disabilities," she said.

Thomas is a certified instructor with the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association who has devoted herself to the success of the center for more than a decade.

## HOLDING THE REINS

Often confined to wheelchairs or walkers, riders are given a whole new perspective from the saddle. The center's unique form of therapy not only builds up muscles; it also builds up self-esteem.

For some of the individuals who participate in the program, being able to act independently is quite an undertaking. Riding horses enables them to feel a sense of power over their bodies and allows them to

be more independent.

This provides riders with a refreshing experience that lets them feel free, relaxed and in control. "They're on a 1,200-pound animal, and they're in charge," Thomas said.

Not only is riding a horse a liberating experience, it also has both psychological and physical benefits. According to Thomas, horses rhythmically and naturally move the body in a manner similar to the human gait, improving posture, balance and muscle control.

Horseback riding also promotes heart health: Riders gain cardiovascular benefits by raising heart rates.

In addition to the physical benefits, the program helps riders improve their social and cognitive abilities. Riders gain increased concentration, spatial awareness and orientation, self-awareness and self-discipline – not to mention a major confidence boost.

And the endless sea of smiles in the arena makes it evident that the students really look forward to the experience. Some of them have been coming to the ranch for several years to participate in weekly classes. Twelve-year-old Maggie McShane is one of them.

"I think one of the biggest things is that she gets to be a kid," said Debbie McShane, Maggie's mother. "She has an activity that she gets to look forward to. It gets her outside and moving and doing things that kids like to do."

Maggie is just one of many students who ventures out to the center every week for therapy. Her mother says she has seen her daughter change for the better since she began riding. She says even though Mag-

gie has a hard time communicating, she knows she enjoys herself and is aware of her surroundings.

"I think it's a wonderful place. I think sometimes she'll maybe not be happy on the ride here, and then when we get here and she realizes where we're at, she's as happy as a little lark."

Another caregiver, Sheila Stephens, says she's noticed a positive change in Mark, a 32-year-old student impacted by autism. According to Stephens, Mark is now able to ride his horse alone and trot at a good speed, but this wasn't always the case.

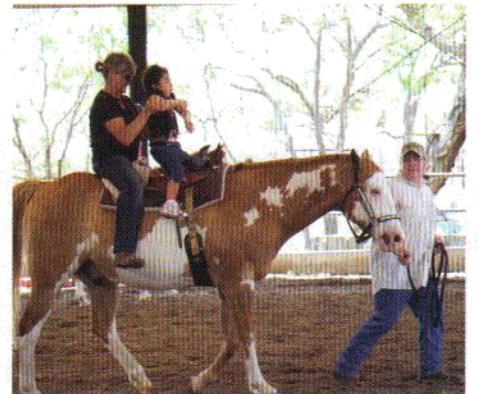
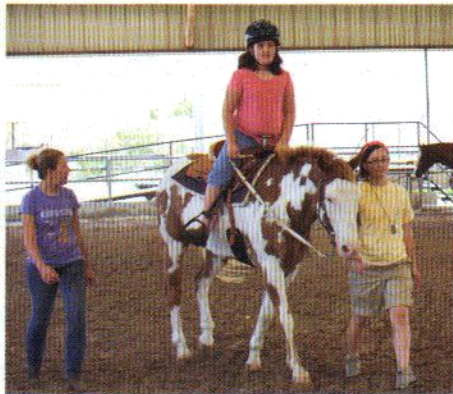
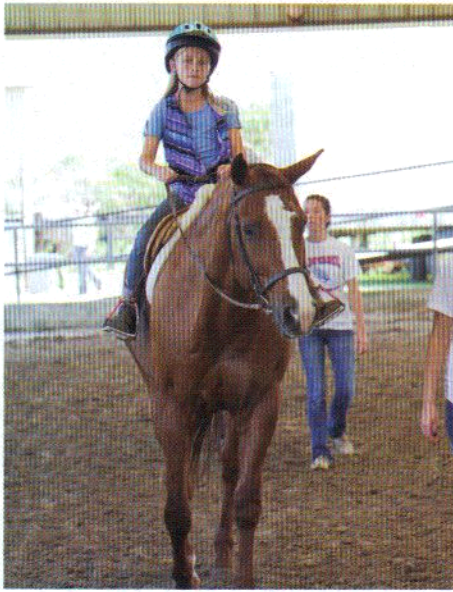
"He just moved on up. He participates very clearly all the time and is just totally focused. And it was something he really wanted to do. You can tell it's something he's very interested in. It's not just something we put him in. It's something that Mark wants. It's a big deal to him, and it means a lot to him."

After three years of hard work and determination, Mark is now participating in the program's advanced riders' class. It's a feat that wouldn't have been accomplished without the help of the center's many dedicated volunteers and instructors like Donna Hamil.

Hamil says serving as a volunteer and seeing the progress students make along the way is an extremely rewarding experience.

"These kids come out here in walkers and wheelchairs, and they get on those horses and smile and have a good time. They give so much ... I receive more than I give, and that's why I stay. It's a passion. I came for the horses, but I stayed for the kids."

*For more information about the Glenoak Therapeutic Riding Center or volunteering, visit [www.reidbthomas.com/Glenoak\\_Program.html](http://www.reidbthomas.com/Glenoak_Program.html) or call Charlene Thomas at 361-537-3495. If you'd like to visit the center, it is located at 1517 Glenoaks Drive, Corpus Christi, Texas 78418.*



RIDING A HORSE IS A LIBERATING EXPERIENCE, BUT IT ALSO HAS PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL BENEFITS.