

# A Collaborative Effort Allows People with Disabilities to Experience the Joy of Horseback Riding



By Beverly Young

This is a story about children with special needs whose exceptional parents had the courage and faith to look beyond their child's physical disability. Their vision granted them opportunities in a therapeutic riding program, which previously would not have included individuals with such severe disabilities.

**O**n a Saturday evening in November 2005, three young women with cognitive and severe physical disabilities had the opportunity to horseback ride with their friends and to do so without a back rider. Halle (a high school junior), Carly (a fourth grader) and Carrie (an adult student at a center-based program) showed courage and enthusiasm while demonstrating for their friends and families just how capable they were to participate in such an activity. The success that Halle, Carly, and Carrie achieved opened a whole new world for individuals, of all ages, with cognitive and severe physical disabilities.

By stepping out of the box and through their collaborative efforts, Sue Cook, President of Liberty Riders Therapeutic Riding Program, Inc., her daughter Sara, a NAHRA-certified (North American Riding for the Handicapped Association) instructor, Karen Orr, developer of the Independence Saddle, and individuals from the Woodland Developmental Center began making the dream of having these exceptional individuals learn and practice mobility skills while riding a horse.

Initially, the focus was to improve mobility skills; the achievement that resulted was beyond imagination. Using the combined philosophies of therapeutic horseback riding and the MOVE® (Mobility Opportunities Via Education) Program, 25 individuals demonstrated achievement in not only their mobility, but also communication and social skills.

During each riding session, the individuals were provided opportunities to practice their mobility skills, which included walking, transitions, and sitting. Individuals would use varying equipment to walk to the arena. As the sessions progressed, their endurance increased and their ability to adapt to a variety of walking surfaces improved, including an inclined ramp to mount on and off the horse. While getting on and riding the horse, there was improvement in weight bearing as well as head and trunk control. Improvement was also evident with in the students who struggled with a limited or exaggerated stride length.

The progress by all the individuals has carried over into their daily transition skills and made their daily living activities, such as toileting, easier. Even though some individuals may have acquired only minor improvement, their newly found confidence has impacted their daily use of mobility skills.

The students' success with the MOVE program and its collaboration with the Liberty Riders, Inc. therapeutic riding program has been a successful partnership. Stepping out of the box is always good, and what program coordinators have learned is that an individual's ability to move, communicate, and explore his or her world has no boundaries. Sometimes the students sum it up best. Take Andrew, age 19, for instance. One day Andrew's teacher asked his classroom aid whether or not she had a problem going to the stables with Andrew. The aid said, "Nope, as long as you don't make me get on the horse." Andrew replied, "No problem, Pat Shue; you sit on a regular saddle, hold onto the horn, tell Jody, 'Walk on.'" The teacher responded, "See how simple it is." •

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