

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.

On 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." •

For more information about MOVE International, visit www.move-international.org. To learn more about NARHA, go to www.narha.org

Independence Saddle

The collaboration of MOVE® (Mobility Opportunities Via Education) and NARHA (North American Riding for the Handicapped Association) was historic. The development of a very special piece of adaptive equipment, The Independence Saddle, made it possible.

In the fall of 2001, Linda Bidabe, the founder and creator of the MOVE Program and Curriculum, conducted a MOVE seminar in Zeeland, Michigan. In the audience was Karen Szymas-Orr. Karen, a lifelong equestrian, held a dream of finding a way to include individuals with severe impairments in horseback riding programs. All too often they are excluded because of the difficulty in helping them safely maintain a sitting position while sitting astride a horse. Little did she know, she shared the same dream as Linda.

Linda stood on a stage against a backdrop of equipment as she began to describe her philosophy and practices. She explained how equipment specifically designed for use in the MOVE Program had been an integral part of her success in helping people learn to sit, stand, and walk. Forearm supports, a unique example of this type of equipment, stabilize the shoulder and pelvic girdle, allowing limited movement of the head and trunk. This in turn, enabled the person to develop independent sitting. Then, Linda spoke the magical words: "I believe if a person who has difficulty sitting is given the use of forearm support, that person then will be able to sit independently." Immediately, Karen envisioned forearm supports on a saddle. By adding these to a saddle, a person with severe impairments could safely sit independently in a saddle while benefiting from the movement of the horse.

Karen already knew that the Australian saddle would be a perfect choice as a base for an adaptive saddle as it is the only saddle ever designed for the primary purpose of keeping the rider seated, safe, and comfortable. With this positioning, the rider's weight is evenly distributed across the horse's back, allowing the greatest comfort for the horse.

Karen was compelled to meet with Linda, not only to share her newfound ideas for an adaptive saddle, but also to learn more about Linda's philosophy, as well as the forearm supports that had played such a key part of her success in empowering individuals to sit independently. By combining their ideas of using an Australian Stock Saddle for a base, the addition of forearm supports, and relying on encouragement from many others, the dream of the Independence Saddle evolved from a concept to a reality.

The MOVE International Board of Directors recognized the Independence Saddle's compatibility with its program and on June 19, 2006 endorsed the Independence Saddle for use within its program. This marked a historic opportunity for those with severe impairments to now participate in horseback riding activities with the feeling of empowerment, dignity, and independence.

With the foresight of one NARHA center to partner with MOVE students by using the Independence Saddle, a host of students were able to experience significant and measurable success. This unparalleled study will hopefully lead to many other collaborations between MOVE and NARHA, allowing those with heart, dedication, and determination the opportunity to make a significant difference in the quality of life for those with severe multiple impairments.

To learn more about The Independence Saddle, go to www.independentstrides.com.



Top photo: Through the use of the Independence Saddle, Carrie is able to ride without the assistance of a back rider. This allows her to be positioned to stretch and strengthen all the muscles of her upper and lower body. This increased muscle strength helps improve her bone and joint health, along with a variety of other mobility skills.

Middle photo: When riding outside and on more natural terrain, Carrie is able to experience a freedom that previously was not an option.

Lower photo: While in her Pacer® Gait Trainer, Carrie walks to the arena, making the most of her mobility opportunities.

