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## A healing touch Southern's horse park earns therapeutic riding accreditation

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By Linda Lockhart

For 5-year-old Jakob Helton, his best friend isn't a dog, it's a horse named Rosy. And he's glad the weather is warming so they can spend time together again.

Jakob has cerebral palsy that affects his lower body and doctors believed he would never walk. But every week during riding season he walks from the stable to climb up on Rosy -- whose ears prick up when she hears his voice -- for an hour of riding therapy at the Ohio Horse Park, part of the Ohio University-Southern campus. Last year, the horse park's Center for Therapeutic Riding earned accreditation as a premier accredited center -- one of 11 accredited centers in Ohio.

His grandmother and guardian, Debbie Helton, credits the therapy with many advances Jakob has made, including contributing to his first steps. Through word-of-mouth, the Ashland, Ky., resident heard about the Horse Park and therapeutic riding two years ago and decided to give it a try.

"I'm constantly trying to find things he can do," Helton said, instead of dwelling on what he can't do. Through word-of-mouth, the Ashland, Ky., resident heard about the Horse Park and therapeutic riding two years ago and decided to give it a try.

Helton described Jakob's body posture as a C-position when he started at age 3. Jakob now sits up proudly on Rosy, issuing gentle encouragement to his equine friend as they go through their paces in the therapeutic riding barn with the help of a certified therapeutic riding instructor and three volunteers. The gait of the horse mimics a normal walking gait in the pelvic, trunk and upper body area of a person--a rhythm that is stimulating to the muscles as well as the brain.

The sessions, although physical workouts for Jakob, also are learning sessions. Maryann Waggoner, a former teacher and a volunteer in the riding program, has incorporated components of Jakob's IEP -- individualized education program -- and he is now learning numbers, letters and colors while he rides, as well as benefitting from the physical activity.

Jakob is one of many who benefit from therapeutic riding program at the Ohio Horse Park, the only center certified by the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association in the region. Kelly Hall, coordinator of equine assisted activities and interim director of the Ohio Horse Park, said more than 100 clients are served each year through weekly sessions, camps or other activities.

With indoor riding facilities, riding activities continue in all but the coldest months. The clients are referred through area social service and health agencies, or like Helton, find the service through word of mouth. Therapeutic riding serves clients with learning disabilities and mental health, as well as physical needs.

And it serves students in Southern's equine studies program who want to add a therapeutic riding certificate to their degree and become certified therapeutic riding instructors. The equine program, which leads to an associate degree, currently enrolls about 25 students as majors. Nearly 75 percent of those students are not from the local area, opting to come to the Southern campus because of the program, Hall said.

Hall, who is a licensed social worker in Kentucky and Ohio as well as a master level certified instructor in therapeutic riding, said a proposal to revise the equine curriculum is in process to better prepare students for specific careers.

The horse industry contributes more than \$102 billion to the gross national product each year, according to Hall, and the proposed changes align areas of emphasis in the program with particular areas of the industry. One of the changes would create a program track for training and instruction, including an option to focus on therapeutic riding. Hall hopes to have completed all reviews and approvals to begin the new program tracks by fall 2009.



From left, volunteer Tom Cantrell works with Jakob and his horse, Rosy, with the help of the 5-year-old's grandmother, Debbie Helton, and volunteer Maryann Waggoner.

Photographer: Linda Lockhart

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Hall is especially proud of the Therapeutic Riding Center's recent accreditation, which is determined by peer review process that considers elements such as safety, the care of the horses, volunteer training procedures, and administration processes. The program scored 299 of 300 possible points, earning accreditation for five years.

For Helton, the proof isn't in the numbers, but in the changes she sees in Jakob. The little boy who she was told would never walk is helped with dismount at the end of his riding session, then takes her hand and walks out of the barn chattering about Rosy. For his fifth birthday, last October, Helton helped schedule a field trip to the Horse Park for Jakob's preschool class. He and Rosy were the stars of the show, she said.

The marked success of Jakob's therapeutic riding sessions stirred an interest in Helton to learn more about horses and riding. She enrolled in riding lessons at the Horse Park and even participated in a horse show with other students, in which she placed third. Helton said being on a horse helps to clear her mind and relax her body.

"It dawned on me, this is my therapy, too," she said.

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