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Children, adults finding strength at Partners for Progress in Mundelein

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Volunteer Sarah Davis of Antioch holds onto Steven Wolff, 8, of Vernon Hills, as he approaches 13-year-old percheron Shrek at Partners for Progress equine therapy center in Mundelein. Wolff then rode Shrek as part of a “Therapeutic Power Hour” session at Partners for Progress. (Candace H. Johnson)

MUNDELEIN – For 8-year-old Steven Wolff, nothing seems to beat a session at Partners for Progress in Mundelein.

Wolff has been visiting the equine therapy center on and off for five years. And although he can't verbalize his love for the organization, he definitely enjoys it, his mother, Debra, said.

Wolff is profoundly autistic. The only reason he can't explicitly express his enchantment with Partners for Progress is because he is nonverbal, Debra Wolff said.

But the Vernon Hills mom just knows that her son loves the center.

“He gets excited,” she said. “We pull up to the stable, and he knows we're here ... he's never as happy as when he's on a horse. The interaction – you can't put a price on it.”

Partners for Progress is a nonprofit organization that offers riding opportunities designed to challenge disabled individuals to achieve their maximum potential.

It was founded about six years ago by Diane Helgeland, who has a background in special education, as well as the equine therapy business.

Helgeland said her center serves between 150 and 170 individuals a week. The organization moved from Gurnee to the Countryside Turf Club in Mundelein about two months ago.

“Our mission is therapeutic programs for riders with disabilities,” Helgeland said of Partners for Progress. “We believe that our [clients] come here for functional gains ... My passion is being in the arena and doing programs that make kids work that much harder. I love every part of it.”

A handful of staff members and slew of volunteers make Partners for Progress work.

The organization also relies on grants and hosts fundraisers throughout the year, such as its annual “Dream Big Derby Day” in May and its “Hoe Down” barn dance in October.

Clients who come to the center may have autism, multiple sclerosis, a physical disability or other special need. Initially, they are evaluated. Then they are regularly assessed during sessions, which often include instruction and hands-on involvement in horse grooming, as well as actual horseback riding.

Improvements in posture, movement, neuromuscular functions, sensory integration and speech can be achieved at the facility through constant, individual-direct intervention from physical or occupational therapists, staff members said.

Helgeland’s daughter Amanda Braden is an occupational therapist at Partners for Progress. She said the horses at the center offered one-of-a-kind therapeutic services that were tangibly valuable to children and adults.

“We have 17 different horses here, and none of them are the same, just like no people are the same,” she said. “So, we try to pair the kids with the horses that they’d get the most out of.”

In addition to hippotherapy, which uses the multidimensional movement of a horse for treatment, Partners for Progress offers a “Therapeutic Power Hour” program that addresses cognitive skills, social interaction and other areas that can be problematic for children and adults.

The facility also offers “Therapeutic Sports Riding,” where independence is the goal and focus is put on the improvement of riding skills.

Combining therapy and horseback riding is a wonderful way to help people, volunteer Barbie Taylor said.

“The kids love it,” she said. “It makes them feel special. They do a lot of things here that they can’t do anywhere else.”

Not one to rest on her laurels, Helgeland is working on growing programs at her center.

Partners for Progress does have clients who participate in the Special Olympics. And last year, a group from the center competed in the National Snaffle Bit Association World Championship Show in Tulsa, Okla.

Helgeland also is starting up a “Heroes for Horses” program for veterans with disabilities.

She said she just wants to see her organization get better and better.

“The sky can be the limit for what you do,” she said. “What we have is great, but let’s keep it rolling.”

Want to learn more?

Partners for Progress is located at the Countryside Turf Club, 12989 W. Hawley Road, in Mundelein. The nonprofit organization will host a food drive and fundraiser from 3 to 5 p.m. Saturday, March 13.

Those who attend the food drive are asked to bring nonperishable items, which will be donated to the Fremont Township Food Pantry. Soup and bread will be served during the event.

In addition, a pony-poop fundraiser will take place during the food drive, where the person who selects the piece of real estate on which a horse does his business will win \$2,500. Cost to enter is \$10.

For more information, call Partners for Progress at 847-226-1300 or visit www.partnersforprogressnfp.org.