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With the Help of Horses

By Nicole Lanphear

On a quiet Thursday afternoon in the hills of Whatcom County, one horse with fuzzy gold fur stands, saddled and waiting. He has dark eyes that mirror his patience. At 17 years old, he is neither old nor young, but he has been at this business since he was 4. Commotion surrounds him, with another horse brushed and waiting for the saddle. A third horse stands, covered in mud and dirt, waiting for the brushes. Volunteers and staff members rush around and converse easily. The conversation drifts over the horse. He is used to the chaos.

One young woman walks up and pats his neck reassuringly. She is approximately 5 feet 1 inch tall and has dark, shoulder-length brunette hair covered in a white riding helmet. This horse is familiar to her, as seen in the motions of checking her saddle routine. She has ridden this horse for the last nine years, half of the horse's life.

For her, riding is more than a hobby. It's therapy.

Rachel Brown has spent years in weekly lessons at the Northwest Therapeutic Riding Center in Bellingham. Horseback riding has natural benefits of balance and strength training, but for Brown, riding has also improved her social skills and confidence.

"If I told someone I was autistic, they'd probably be surprised," Brown says. "I don't look like the stereotypical disabled person."

Brown, 23, has Asperger's Syndrome, a degree of autism. People with Asperger's tend to have high IQs, but don't understand subtle social cues and struggle in social situations. Rachel has overcome the strain from years of other kids harassing and bullying her in school. Riding helps her in ways that a classroom can't, providing a safe environment to escape. With the help of horses and determination, she has accomplished more than her doctors or parents thought possible.

Brown's story

Brown's mother, Vicki Brown, says she noticed a change in her daughter at 18 months, but wasn't sure what it was. Through trial-and-error tests with countless doctors, years passed without a reasonable answer.

"I was told when she was 4 and a half that she was retarded and to send her to an institution," Vicki Brown says.

The Browns wasn't given a reasonable answer until their daughter was in second grade. A psychoneurologist diagnosed her with Asperger's Syndrome and attention deficit disorder. Asperger's syndrome is a degree of autism that specifically targets language skills. She was able to teach herself to read, but didn't speak until she was 4 years old.

The National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke estimates asperger syndrome affects one out of every 5,000 children, and boys are four times more likely to be affected.

With proper medications and therapy, Vicki Brown says by the time her daughter reached third grade, she picked up on her studies right away and caught up to her class.

Overcoming a full cup

Dealing with the public-school system was still an issue, Vicki Brown says, because the schools didn't know how handle Brown, who would throw a fit if she thought she wasn't being heard.

Brown also had to overcome teasing and harassing from other children. The family moved from Bellevue to Bellingham for Brown's freshman year, but the teasing didn't stop. In high school, the harassment peaked.

"Her cup was always full," Vicki Brown says. "She was bombarded so much with people pushing her buttons, she found it hard to relax."

After high school, Brown was able to interact with people without the worry of harassment.

"The kids didn't understand why she looked the same, but acted differently," Vicki Brown says.

Brown says other students have picked on her since the first grade, and the teachers usually didn't stop it.

One teacher, Brown remembers, was especially mean.

"The teacher just didn't understand," Brown says. "She was condescending to me. She treated me like I was stupid because of my disability."

Finding a way to relax

After the family moved to Bellingham in 1998, a doctor recommended therapeutic riding.

The owner of the riding center, Julia Bozzo, says the rhythmic motion of horseback riding helps normalize muscle impulses and environmental perceptions. People with autism also have a hard time relating to their parents, friends and animals. Riding horses allows them to connect to people and animals.

Vicki Brown says her daughter was stiff and frustrated when she first started riding, mainly because of social stress, and the endless teasing from school. She was hard on the horses and volunteers at the riding center. Nearly 10 years later, Brown receives criticism, takes instructions and can ride independently.

Brown says she is able to relax while she is riding.

Bozzo says Brown has made a miraculous change in the past few years.

"As her confidence has built along with her maturity, her skill level has increased," Bozzo says. "Riding has also helped her special perception. When she first started, she took tiny steps, so we spent time just walking the horse around."

Along with her weekly riding lessons, Brown is taking an Asian studies class and a liberal arts class at Western. She also works 10 hours a week at the Human Resources office doing clerical work.

Brown graduated with an associate's degree from Whatcom Community College in March 2007. She graduated with a 3.4 GPA and is working on a history degree with a graduate degree in archival science at Western. Brown says she would like to work in a library, which she did as a senior in high school.

Western's disAbilities Resources serves approximately 400 students on campus with various disabilities, nine of which have Asperger's Syndrome, Director David Brunnemer says. He says people with Asperger's tend to do well academically in some areas but have difficulties in others. Some excel in math and not in writing, he says, while others struggle with math and do well in English.

Brown took a calculus class at Whatcom, Vicki Brown says and it was the first C she ever received, so she decided to not take any more calculus classes. She prefers history and liberal arts.

When she started at Western in the spring of 2007, Brown taped class lectures and took notes, which helped her remember the information. For papers, she has certain procedures to follow and gets help from tutors to remain independent from her parents. She is even planning to live in a dorm on campus in the future.

"She never could have done that five years ago," Vicki Brown says.

Brown says she enjoys the professors at Western, as well as the classes.

After riding lessons, Brown goes home and works on homework, taking a lot of notes, she says. She also watches anime DVDs, reads anime comics and listens to Japanese pop CDs. Her love for anime began as a child.

"I used to watch anime shows on Nickelodeon, back when Nickelodeon had good shows," Brown says.

Lately, she enjoys watching Mel Brooks movies and reading Harry Potter books.

Brown also lives with two cats, named Ajax and Canaan, who is by definition, "Rachel's cat." Canaan was the promised cat and thus named in reference to the Biblical promised land of Canaan. She is called the queen of the house and is partial to cheese sandwiches from Brown's plate.

Another day, another lesson

Brown wears her English breeches and tall, black English boots. She sits straight on her companion, Kleng. They walk and trot around the arena at the instructor's command. She is strong enough to ride independently, but has a volunteer leading her for safety reasons.

Riding instructor Danielle Shimota tells one of the volunteers how to lead Brown's horse.

"She's a very independent rider," Shimota says. "When he trots, make sure he doesn't go too fast. She will do the rest."

The riding lessons include physical and mental activities. Bozzo orders Brown to ride up to one bucket along the rail and pick up the brushes, in the order of grooming a horse, and put them in another bucket at the end of the arena. It is a race. Twenty minutes later, the lesson ends with Shimota asking Brown to name four parts of the horse.

The sun sets and the wind chills as Brown dismounts and leads Kleng out of the arena. She unlatches the leather straps on

the bridle and slides it off Kleng's head, which is at the height of her shoulders. Then she moves to the saddle, loosening the girth, warm from the horse's activities. Silently, she pulls the saddle off and carries it in both arms into the tack room.

The buzz of the barn and its volunteers swarms around Brown and Kleng, but they are in a separate world, connected through a nine-year friendship. Brown finishes up with a quick brushing of Kleng's coat, which is growing thicker as the season gets colder. Brown and her mother slowly wander back to their car, back to homework and to another week of the real world.