



# NORTHWEST THERAPEUTIC RIDING CENTER

WRITTEN BY KAYLIN STIEFER | PHOTOGRAPHED BY DIANE PADYS

A horse's neigh sounds in the distance as Julia Bozzo emerges from her house. Bozzo has always loved horses, but when she came to Bellingham, she realized there wasn't a riding center. So Bozzo started one. It turned out to be much more than just a place to ride horses.

The NorthWest Therapeutic Riding Center, which provides therapy to people with physical and mental challenges, was built from the ground up in 1993. Bozzo runs it with the help of Hilary Groh, dozens of volunteers, and her husband.

Equine-assisted activities and therapies have physical, psychological, and emotional benefits. Over the years, Bozzo says the center has offered adaptive riding lessons to a wide range of participants, aged 4 to 76, with all kinds of challenges, including autism, Down syndrome, spina bifida, ADHD, anxiety, and depression.

Riders not only learn grooming and horsemanship, they also gain control, balance, a sense of body language, and social and

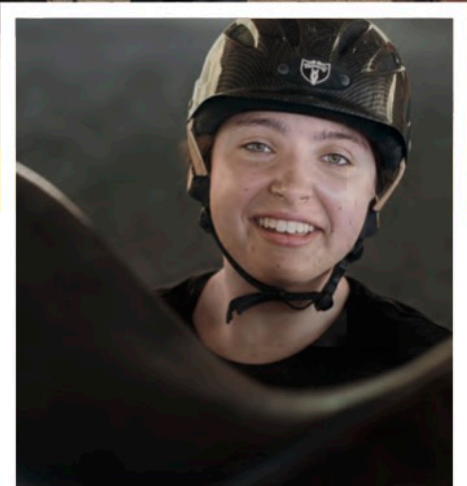
communication skills, all while normalizing muscle tone, improving respiratory systems, and having fun.

"We focus on strengths and abilities," Groh says. She says riding is holistic and treats the whole body instead of focusing on one part.

Participants ready themselves and their horses to the best of their ability—putting on their own helmets before saddling and brushing their rides. Some use the ramp for assistance on mounting their horse.

There's even a four-legged star in their midst. One of the center's oldest horses, a Norwegian Fjord named Kleng, was named National Therapeutic Horse of the Year in 2009 and was inducted into the Horse Stars Hall of Fame in 2013. He is short and sturdy with a calm and friendly personality.

Not only do riders benefit, the people who work with them do too. Bozzo says volunteers take what they learn from this experience and transfer it into their daily lives with family and friends and can go on to therapeutic careers. "It's every bit as beneficial to our



volunteers as it is for the participants," Bozzo says.

At the end of the lesson, participants will play games. Bozzo explained one game that involves calling out someone else's name and then tossing a colorful ball to them. This nudges participants to be social and learn each other's names, while also challenging their balance on the horse.

Bozzo says games like this prompt participants to speak while they're learning to ride. The center's mottos include: "Giving a leg up to people of all abilities," and "Where hoofbeats are heartbeats." Bozzo and her crew not only want to help people with their challenges, but give them a sense of accomplishment. "It's more strengthening and empowering than healing," Bozzo says.