

# One hoofbeat at a time...

## Working horses offer unique therapeutic benefits for a wide range of human needs

by Nicole Lanphear

**A**stride a golden horse whose black, round eyes reflect his gentle nature and docile temperament, 14-year-old Katie sits tall, clutching the soft, worn out leather of the reins while gently pulling the horse to a stop. Her head, covered with a white helmet dips slightly as she looks down at her steed and unleashes a radiant smile.

Katie leans forward carefully, able to smell the dust and leather scent emanating from the horse, and patting the thick, rich fur of her faithful companion, a 14-year-old horse named Kurt.

Katie has been riding for five years. She is autistic.

The Northwest Therapeutic Riding Center of Bellingham, home to Kurt and four other therapeutic riding horses, has assisted children and adults with mental or physical disabilities for 13 years. Katie is one of countless autistic children nation-

wide who has benefited from the unique physical therapy and friendship a horse provides.

Braving the cold and rain, Katie looks forward to her lessons every week. Riding is very calming for Katie. It helps her focus in on the world around her, and helps her become more social.

Katie begins every lesson brushing her horse alongside her instructor, a Western Washington University senior, Kathryn Hart who has worked with Katie for three years. Together they brush off the weekly dust and dirt that accumulate in the thick fur coat of Kurt, who is a Norwegian Fjord, a breed of horse with a characteristic light-colored fur and a thick mane that stands up like a six-inch Mohawk. The breed is also known for its hard work ethic and reliability. Kurt is one of two on the grounds at the Riding Center, both acquired 11 years ago.

### The Therapy of Riding

“Riding has a lot of benefits,” says Julia Bozzo, director and founder of the Riding Center. The rhythmic movement of riding a horse helps most all systems of the body. The respiratory, the cardiovascular systems all fall into rhythm with the beat of a horse’s walk or trot.

Such movement provides stimulation to the rider, which is especially good for autistic students, like Katie. In addition riding simulates the movement of the human pelvis, thus assisting in normalizing muscle tone and range of motion.

On top of physical therapy, Bozzo and her team of volunteers also highlight various cognitive activities throughout each individual or group lesson. There are special games and props used which help with processing and order functions within the brain.



Photo: Nicole Lanphear



Julia Bozzo

## Maximum Independence

The Riding Center is one of 650 nationwide that help 30,000 individuals. They are held to specifications of the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association, through which each instructor is certified.

Clients at the Riding Center have ranged from a 3-year-old with developmental problems to a 74-year-old recovering from a stroke. There has also been a rise in autistic students, up to 9 out of the 30 students they serve weekly. "We still look at each rider as an individual," Bozzo said. "There is nothing that we do the same with all the riders except for safety precautions." All safety precautions align with the Association's standards, such as helmets for all riders.

The entire facility is designed for maximum independence, according to Bozzo. The ramp is the most important part. Painted red to match the barn, the ramp is set up with an incline wide enough for a wheelchair to ascend unassisted. There is a narrow alleyway, wide enough for a horse to pull right up to the ramp, so that riders can either mount the horse assisted or unassisted.



Photo: Julia Bozzo

## The Horses

Many parents are rather nervous when they first come to the riding center with their children, Bozzo said. "But after a few weeks, they're thrilled." The hardest obstacle for many clients to overcome is simply signing up. After some time; however, the horses put most everyone at ease.

The Riding Center's four main therapeutic riding horses are products of endless time and training. Each horse has their own strengths and weaknesses, like Kurt, who is very reliable for more advanced riders like Katie. Other horses are great with adult riders because of the client's various sizes and riding capabilities.

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# A Day in the Life of a Working Horse



**6:00 AM** After 12 years of a routine, Kurt is used to getting his feed at exactly 6:00 a.m.

Stall is cleaned - he visits with the stall cleaner

In the summer, it's out to pasture with his fellow Fjord, Kleng. They run two laps around the pasture before lowering their heads to graze.

Before each lesson, Kurt is lounged, brushed, and saddled, sometimes with the help of the rider.

He has lessons 5-6 days a week, with 9-10 riders each week. Average of two lessons a day.

**5:00 PM** Afternoon feed

**8:00 PM** Evening feed

Photo: Julia Bozzo

## About the Author

**Nicole Lanphear** is a junior at Western Washington University in Bellingham, majoring in journalism. She has owned and ridden horses for the last twelve years, showing performance, gaming and reining as a rodeo queen for two years.







Photo: Nicole Lanphear

There is even a miniature horse. Nikki, a horse whose overall dark brown body is no longer or taller than that of a Great Dane, has enough hair running down the crest of her neck in a mass of white, afro-like dreadlocks to rival the shaggiest mop. However, her height and friendliness allow hesitant students to grow more comfortable around horses.

One of the most important aspects of the horses as therapy is the companionship between horse and rider. "Katie loves Kurt," Hart said. "We have occasionally paired her with different horses but Katie is happiest when she is with Kurt."



### The Progress

Katie has made impressive improvements, said Hart. She has developed better communication skills with everyone at the Riding Center. "She has advanced to the point of saddling up her own horse, which requires great planning as well as gross and fine motor skills," Hart said. Hart continues to focus on helping Katie develop her skills as a rider, which in turn help build symmetrical muscles and better balance and awareness.

After every lesson, Katie helps brush Kurt off again. She laughs and smiles, watching Hart lead Kurt back to his pasture. "Kurt gone!" she will squeal, both as a question and a statement. The glow on Katie's face doesn't falter, even when she reluctantly walks back to the car. It is just another heart touched, another friendship established, and another day at the Riding Center.

For more information on Northwest Therapeutic Riding Center visit [www.nwtrc.org](http://www.nwtrc.org)



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