

Healing horses

by Kenna Hodgson
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Brienne Figgie, 6, put on her riding helmet, walked to the mounting ramp and climbed onto Kurt, a small, sturdy, blond Norwegian Fjord pony.

"Tell Kurt to 'walk on,' and he will go," riding instructor Julia Bozzo said.

Although Brienne was eager to start riding, she did not give the command. Western senior Malia Burgess, a volunteer at the NorthWest Therapeutic Riding Center, did so for her, and off they went. One volunteer led the pony while two others stood on each side of Brienne as she gripped the reigns.

Brienne is developmentally disabled -- physically, she is 6, but mentally, she is 2, her mother Jenny Figgie said. Brienne does not talk much. The only word she uses regularly is "mama," her mother said. Through the use of therapeutic riding, she is working on her attention span, balance and ability to give verbal commands.

"The words are there," Bozzo said. "We wouldn't push her if I didn't know she could do it."

Bozzo said she keeps the riders motivated through instruction and praise.

Therapeutic riding is beneficial for both physically and mentally disabled people, according to the North American Riding for the Handicapped Web site. Because the movement of the horse is similar to the way humans walk, Burgess said, it helps the riders learn balance, stability and muscle stimulation. Therapeutic riding also helps build confidence, patience and self-esteem in students, she said.

"I think it's a high-level motivator to have an animal in the process," Figgie said.

Figgie sat outside the riding ring with a smile on her face and watched her daughter.

"She's really doing something all her own," Figgie said. "It makes it more valuable in terms of her confidence."

By the end of the lesson, Brienne successfully gave many commands to Kurt.

"Today was a really good day -- she did really great today," her mother said.

Therapeutic riding can help people with muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, mental disabilities, attention deficit disorder and other disabilities, according to the NARHA Web site.

The riding center is located 10 minutes away from Bellingham off the Mount Baker Highway. A little red barn, tall sunflowers and clucking chickens make the center a rural paradise.

Bozzo opened the nonprofit center in 1993, and it is the only premier accredited center in the county, which means that the center obeys all 95 NARHA standards.

Bozzo said she first learned of therapeutic riding in junior-high school when she boarded her horse next to the NARHA founder's animal. After earning a master's in animal science from the University of Hawaii, she went to school in California to become a therapeutic riding instructor.

"It's really rewarding," she said. "Every lesson is a success."

Twenty-two volunteers and six horses work at the nonprofit organization. Bozzo said the center would not be able to run without the volunteers.

Burgess said she volunteers four days a week.

"I'm a physical therapy major, but this is what I really want to do," Burgess said.

Laura Rawlings, 19, has been riding at the center for nine years. She has Down syndrome, but Rawlings, an able-bodied rider, can ride by herself.

"DT is my heroine," she said of her horse. "Riding this horse makes me feel like a brand-new person. We have a very special connection."

Laura Rawlings' mother, Mary Rawlings, said she has never had to worry about Laura riding because Bozzo takes special care to make it safe.

"These horses are really reliable," Burgess said. "No horse is completely reliable, but once they get a kid on their back, it's like they know."

Rachel Brown, 20, is a high-functioning autistic woman who started taking therapeutic riding lessons six years ago, her mother Vicki Brown said. Autism is a developmental disability that affects verbal and non-verbal communication, social interaction and educational performance.

Brown said that in the beginning Rachel just practiced leading the horse. She took tiny steps but eventually progressed to riding. She now can take constructive criticism without getting upset.

Research on therapeutic riding is scarce, according to an article in the Journal of Rehabilitation, but case studies done in the '80s reported that the conditions of adults and children with disabilities improved after participating in therapeutic horseback-riding

programs. The studies focused on varying disabilities including spinal cord impairment, cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis and autism.

Vicki Brown said she has her own proof in her daughter of the benefits of riding. For example, Rachel Brown's rigidity, a common symptom of autism, has lessened.

"It's truly amazing how therapeutic it is," Vicki Brown said.