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Disabled children respond to equine therapy

By **Carrie A. Moore**, Deseret News

Published: Friday, Aug. 6, 2010 11:38 p.m. MDT

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Tom Smart, Deseret News

Gennave Dille, 9, hugs Ziggy as Cindy Becker helps her at the Buffalo Ranch in Farmington on Thursday as part of a therapeutic riding program organized by the nonprofit group Therapeutic Assets.

FARMINGTON — There is a web of silent bonding at Buffalo Ranch that's palpable for those who look into the eyes of small children as their bodies drape the bare backs of their hoofed healers.

To trust and love a horse that could easily crush its tiny rider is a weekly exercise in faith for the parents who come each Thursday — rain or shine — to watch Cindy Becker and her horses work their therapeutic magic.

The weekly sessions on horseback offer severely disabled children a form of enhanced physical therapy they simply can't get from humans. An unspoken affection, combined with rhythmic movement and the muscle coordination required for the child to remain balanced on the horse's back helps strengthen not only stiff necks, spines and limbs, but also opens hearts to a joy that is as unique as the bond between horse and rider.

"The kids get burned out in regular therapy," Becker says, brushing a trickle of sweat aside as it runs down her cheek on a hot summer morning.

"We can push them so much further doing this because they don't realize we're doing therapy," she says, her jeans dusty from dozens of trips on foot around the indoor arena, leading her four-legged friends as they carry their young charges in a smile-filled therapy session.

An occupational therapist, Becker spends Monday through Wednesday each week earning her share of the family's income as a home health care therapist. Then she rises early on Thursdays at her home in Ogden Valley to load five horses into the trailer. It's an hour's drive to the indoor arena at Buffalo Ranch, where she operates the riding program for children.

Therapeutic Assets is the name of her non-profit enterprise, which provides therapeutic riding not only to children, but to some disabled adults as well. It doesn't take a physician to see the emotional, social and behavioral benefits as fear and resistance give way to trust — one hoof-print in the dirt at a time.

Cindy Alldredge has watched her 6-year-old daughter, Aubry, who has Down syndrome, ride the past couple of weeks. "She absolutely loves it. She needs help with her muscle tone and it's so great for strengthening her core muscles.

"I've been looking into this since she was born, but other places it's so expensive. They work hard to keep the costs down, and we're able to get a sponsor for her," Alldredge says, watching Aubry eye a miniature horse named Bella after her ride on BJ, a full-sized animal. "Just sitting on the horse stimulates her neurological responses. Lots of times when she's on the horse, she will sing."

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Gennaveve Dilley, 9, hugs Ziggy as Cindy Becker helps her at the Buffalo Ranch in Farmington on Thursday as part of a therapeutic riding program organized by the nonprofit group Therapeutic Assets.

Kelly Grove credits the horses for working wonders on her 5-year-old daughter, Clarissa, who has severe cerebral palsy and couldn't hold her head or body upright when they began riding three years ago. She's now able to do both, and "the horses are 100 percent of what gave that to her," Grove says.

Five-year-old Deacon Nielson, of Clearfield, wasn't happy the first time he was put on a horse, remembers his mom, Kristi. At four months old, he had a stroke caused by the malformation of arteries and veins in his brain. She heard about equine therapy from another parent at Deacon's pre-school. "Now he smiles as soon as we get him on the horse. It gets him to do things like leaning on his arms and up on his hands and knees that we can't get him to do in other settings."

Emotionally, she has watched a change, "though it's hard to describe, it's something even the horses know. They have to

be gentle with the kids." She sees a calming and a warmth in both horse and rider — "they seem to have some sort of connection together."

That connection is what keeps Becker coming to Farmington each Thursday, even though it's a 14-hour day by the time she loads the horses and returns home around 11 p.m. That her work is truly a labor of love is underscored by the fact that Becker has lupus, and spends her Fridays in bed recovering from the physical toll inflicted by a long day at the arena.

Her husband "thinks I'm crazy. He asks me why I can't do it with one horse," knowing that she couldn't serve as many children that way. "He is a big support — I couldn't do it without him."

Becker loves her job so much, she refinances her home every year to continue providing the cut-rate equine therapy for her young patients. The \$200 fee she charges for about a dozen weeks of therapy doesn't begin to cover her costs. She spent about \$16,000 from her own pocket last year to keep the program going, she said.

She's hoping for additional community support because insurance won't cover the cost, and parents whose children have so many other medical bills can't afford to pay more.

As she recovers from a long day with the horses each week, Becker says she never wonders whether she'll do it again the next week. "When I see the kids and the progress they have made, that's the reward for me."

How long will she keep doing it?

"As long as the kids keep coming, and I can keep walking," she said.

To learn more about Therapeutic Assets, or to donate, visit www.therapeuticassets.org.

e-mail: carrie@desnews.com

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