

# LOUDOUNER



SUMMER 2016

Loudoun Times-Mirror

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## HORSE POWER

Loudoun Therapeutic Riding strengthens bodies and minds through equine-assisted therapy

By Ed Felker

Six-year-old Ben held on to color-coded reins and told Charlie, a brown and white paint therapy horse at Loudoun Therapeutic Riding, to "walk on." On his left side, a volunteer led Charlie with a lead rope. Behind her, another volunteer held on to the saddle and secured Ben's leg, while a third assisted from the opposite side. Charlie nudged the group forward into an easy walk, and Ben's eyes turned upward to a cloudless blue sky.

"One," he called out, as he spotted the first airplane of the day.

Following a few steps behind, Heather Payne confirmed the sighting and began her assigned task of keeping track. "One," she repeated excitedly.

Airplane counting is not technically a part of equine-assisted therapy, but Payne, a riding instructor and LTR's volunteer coordinator, has a gift for working with kids. And keeping them interested during their therapy sessions is important.

"I enjoy working with young children most," Payne said. "They try so hard and they allow me to use my imagination to keep them engaged, happy and smiling." Sometimes that means hunting imaginary T-Rexes along shady wooded trails or being herded like a cow. On this day, it was spotting airplanes — and it was working. As the team navigated the fields and trails of historic Morven Park at Leesburg, the home of LTR, Ben was all smiles.

When Ben, who suffered a stroke and subsequent cerebral palsy years earlier, arrives for his lesson, Payne always checks in with Ben's mom or dad to see how he is doing. Their answer determines how much they try to do that day.

"My main focus is having him strengthen and use the right side of his



At left, Kate Sulek, Juliette Yeates and Sue Radioff lead Ben Stewart (above) and "Charlie."

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Therapeutic riding can help people with disabilities or special needs build self-confidence, improve concentration and increase core strength, balance and joint mobility.

body. His right hand and leg specifically," Payne said. "So having steady riding hands," he has to think about where his right hand is and utilize it to steer his horse. When he "walks on" I ask him to use his legs so that he is using both legs at the same time."

Different games or exercises are used to keep him using both hands and steering the horse builds motor planning skills. "Overall, it's about gross and fine motor skills with Ben," Payne said. "Everything from putting on the reins and taking them off to adjusting his stirrups helps him use his right hand and right side."

Continuity, preferably with the same team of volunteers week to week, is important. "Any time spent in a barn with a horse is time well spent," LTR program director Kathy Blaine said. "But to build on that over the course of eight weeks and sometimes for a number of years, we really see students progress."

For over 40 years, LTR has provided equine-assisted activities and therapies to people with a wide variety of cognitive, physical and psychological disabilities, using three main types of therapy

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### Supporting those who served and sacrificed

Loudoun Therapeutic Riding offers equine-assisted activities and therapies to wounded military and veterans at no charge. Mary Jo Beckman, a master instructor for LTR, has been instrumental in getting veterans involved. She is a retired Navy commander and the co-founder of the Equine Services for Heroes program through the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship. That program at Ft. Myer used Caisson horses from Arlington Cemetery and worked mostly with wounded personnel with amputations who

were at Walter Reed Army Medical Center for rehabilitation.

Many wounded warrior participants have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder or traumatic brain injury. These conditions impact the physical, cognitive, social, emotional and behavioral health of the veteran. But through equine-assisted activities and therapies, valuable skills lost can be regained.

A recent client shared how working with LTR has helped her.

"I am going through some of the most major changes of my life right now as I look for a home and work to build a new life. Therapeutic riding is one of the main founda-

tions on which I am able to make these changes," she said. "My trust in you and Gable (her therapy horse) has become a bridge to the world."

LTR hosts groups from the Washington, D.C. and Martinsburg, W.Va. Veterans Administration hospitals, as well as Loudoun County's Boulder Crest Retreat.

"As someone who has served herself, Mary Jo has always had an interest in supporting veterans," LTR Executive Director Joanne Hart said. "She has been instrumental in growing equine services for military service men and women." And LTR's program will be expanding. LTR has recently ac-

quired the nonprofit organization Spirit Serving Veterans.

"My longtime associate in the world of equine therapy and SSV founder, Pam Milner, dreamed of expanding much-needed services to those who have given so much to serve this country," Hart said.

Unfortunately, Milner died suddenly in October 2015 just as plans for the acquisition were being finalized. "Pam's untimely death has made us more determined to honor her work through service to the veteran and veteran family community," Hart said. In her honor, the SSV Pam Milner Memorial Fund has been established at LTR to continue the work she held dear.



Heather Payne assists rider Bryan Campos Morejon.

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programs. Therapeutic riding can help people with disabilities or special needs build self-confidence, improve concentration and increase core strength, balance and joint mobility.

For those who cannot or choose not to sit on a horse, LTR offers a carriage and cart-driving program where participants can still benefit from interacting with the horse. Communication skills, gross and fine motor skills, self-confidence and self-awareness can all be improved through carriage driving.

Individuals of all ages can benefit from these therapies and activities, but a majority of LTR's clients are children. Since its inception, LTR has partnered with Loudoun County Public Schools to offer therapeutic riding opportunities to some students, generally about 25 each semester.

Although LTR's clients include kids with cerebral palsy, Down syndrome and other disabilities, about 35 percent of its roster of riders is on the autism spectrum. Part of the reason for this is that the classrooms they work with are specifically for kids with autism. But Joanne Hart, LTR's executive director, has seen a marked increase in clients with autism over the years, and many are making great progress through equine-assisted therapies.

"There is something about horses and kids with autism," Hart said. "Once they get involved, they usually stick with it. And they get an awful lot of benefit from the bond."

Over the years, Hart and Blaine have both had the remarkable experience of witnessing kids speaking for the first time. Horses are a great encouragement, and kids who have never spoken before are highly motivated to verbalize some way to make the horse go. "One child I remember clearly that had never spoken before, told his horse 'walk' and we were all in tears. The teachers, the volunteers, everyone," Hart said. "It was so special."

In addition to clients on the autism spectrum, LTR has also seen an increase in young people with psychosocial and behavioral-emotional diagnoses. LTR partners with the North Spring Behavioral Healthcare Center, an inpatient center for adolescents from age 7 to 17.

Hundreds of North Spring students over the past 10 years have participated in therapy at LTR, and the results are profound. "I've had therapists tell me that the children who do best overall in their treatment are the ones that have been through our barn doors," Blaine said. "We see just a huge change in the kids who gain a new sense of self-confidence, a boost of self-esteem, who kind of find their place to be."

Back at the barn after a good ride and a total airplane count somewhere north of 20, Ben smiled still. But he



was likely unaware of all the benefits of the day's lesson. He wasn't there to strengthen his core, to increase bilateral activity or to improve collaboration between the right and left hemispheres of his brain. But all these things were happening. He just focused on Heather's words, on Charlie, on the view of the path ahead between Charlie's ears and on the occasional passing plane.

Anne Stewart, Ben's mom and a physician, has seen the rewards of that hard work Ben doesn't know he's doing. "The biggest benefit I have seen (both during the sessions and beyond) is Ben's command on life. He has more self-assurance and a bigger voice for himself," Stewart said. "There's something about working with the horse (a being significantly bigger than he!) that helps him feel capable of tackling other

difficult areas of life. It's simply amazing."

"A therapy session free from nagging and disappointment, yet rich with mental and physical strengthening and accomplishments," she said. "There is no price you can put on that."

It takes a dedicated, highly-trained staff and hundreds of devoted volunteers contributing countless hours to do the work that LTR does. But every-

one working in the field of equine-assisted therapy is quick to credit the importance of the horse.

"Connecting to a horse is so different, so effective," Blaine said. "There is something about them that draws people into the moment and makes them really present and really aware of themselves. They fill a space in people sometimes that is a real void. And they do it effortlessly."

#### Loudoun Therapeutic Riding partners with Morven Park

Loudoun Therapeutic Riding's history with Morven Park goes back to the program's roots over 40 years ago. Parents brought children to Morven for lessons as part of Loudoun's 4-H programs. Then the program, at the time called Loudoun 4-H Club's Riding for the Handicapped Foundation Inc., later condensed to Loudoun Therapeutic Riding, ran for several years at Montresor Farm near Lucketts. From there, it moved to the 4-H Fairgrounds in Leesburg.

Meanwhile, Joanne Hart, who is LTR's current executive director had moved from North Carolina to Leesburg in 1984 to work with LTR. She

received her certification to teach therapeutic riding in 1980 and started a center in Raleigh, N.C. mentoring others interested in starting programs elsewhere in the state.

In the early 1990s, LTR was outgrowing its space at the fairgrounds and Hart approached then-director of Morven Park Will O'Keefe to see if hosting the program there was an option. Morven Park's equestrian instructor training program, where instructors could earn their teaching certification, was winding down at that time. So Morven had the room to become the home of Loudoun Therapeutic Riding.

"Morven Park has been extremely generous to us for the last 21 years by allowing us to conduct our classes there for probably enough to turn a light bulb on every month. They've given us space for the

horses, use of the arenas, the entire thousand acre facility to ride, plus offices and classrooms," Hart said. "So we can't say enough about how good they've been to us all these years to allow us to do that."

And the relationship became permanent last fall when Morven Park signed a 90-year lease for a 15-acre parcel on which a new facility will be built.

The new facility, which will include a 20-stall barn, a small indoor arena, classroom, office space and an outdoor arena, will allow LTR to do more of what they do best. Currently, since they share barns and arenas with Morven Park and its busy event schedule, they can provide therapy only on weekdays. Working in their own facility will enable LTR to increase participants by 25 percent as soon as it opens its doors.

The expanded schedule also helps the volunteer manpower required to facilitate the therapy sessions.

"A lot of people who work during the week would love to come and volunteer on a Saturday and we've never been able to offer that," Hart said. "So that's going to be really nice that we can offer some opportunities for volunteers on the weekends."

With the addition of more staff and other expenses, operating costs for LTR will likely double in the new space. The reduced fees charged to clients make up only about 30 percent of the annual budget. The rest, not to mention the cost of the construction, comes from generous individuals and local businesses.

To learn more about LTR and how you can help by donating or volunteering, visit [ltrf.org](http://ltrf.org).

## PARTING SHOT



Heather Payne, Sue Radloff and Ben Stewart  
at a Loudoun Therapeutic Riding lesson.

— Photo By Ed Felker