

Healing With Hooves:

Loudoun Therapeutic Riding

By Katie Navarra



Riders and their families find support and joy at Loudoun Therapeutic Riding in Leesburg, Virginia.
Photo courtesy of Loudoun Therapeutic Riding

Historians doubt that Winston Churchill actually said, “There is something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man.”

Regardless of who coined the phrase, it’s undeniable that horses have a sixth sense, an innate ability to see into a person’s soul and fill a void. While horses give their all to humans of all backgrounds, horses reserve something extra special for riders with physical, developmental or emotional challenges — a fact that’s evident every day at the Loudoun Therapeutic Riding (LTR) in Leesburg, Virginia.

“The horses are really at the heart of what we do,” said Kathy Blaine, program director at Loudoun Therapeutic Riding. “People are drawn to horses and the horses are what truly make a difference in peoples’ lives.”

For more than four decades, Loudoun Therapeutic Riding has embraced individuals with physical and intellectual disabilities, cerebral palsy, autism spectrum disorder, psychosocial/emotional disorders, Down Syndrome, post-traumatic stress disorder, cancer and other diagnoses.

“We help individuals on their journeys toward greater quality of life and healing,” said Executive Director Joanne Hart.

Not only have the humans and the horses at LTR selflessly served the individuals who need them most, their work has earned national recognition for the center on multiple occasions. The center carries the distinction of being the first accredited equine-assisted activities and therapies (EAAT) facility in Virginia, and among the first in the nation.

“We are also one of the few centers in the nation that has an adaptive carriage that’s wheelchair accessible,” Joanne said. “Gable, a Clydesdale/Standardbred cross pulls it.”

Most recently, one of their beloved therapy horses, 21-year-old Halffinger pony Andy’s Arlin, aka Andy, has once again brought the center into the spotlight.

Honorable Service

During the 2015 Washington International Horse Show, Andy received the Klinger Perpetual Award for Honor & Service. True to his mischievous personality, he captured the hearts of audience members when he stole a carrot out of the silver bucket presented during the awards ceremony.

“Andy made the most of his recognition that night. He walked down center line and smiled, curling up his lip to check out the arena,” said Kathy.

The Klinger Perpetual Award for Honor & Service was created in 2013 to honor Klinger, a horse who touched the lives of many in his life of service with the Third U.S. Infantry Regiment (The Old Guard) Caisson Platoon. Klinger had served as the official escort to the president of the United States, led the Presidential Inaugural Parade and acted as a TAPS Ambassador bringing comfort to veterans and families of our fallen heroes.

Like Klinger, Andy also serves U.S. veterans through his participation in LTR’s Equine Services for Heroes. “I saw a grown man, a veteran of the armed forces, cry while sitting on Andy’s back. The rider finally felt free. Andy carried the weight of the warrior and his thoughts, and gave the warrior an opportunity to finally let go and allow someone else to carry the weight of his burdens,” recounted Allison Goldfarb, a therapeutic riding instructor at LTR.

At LTR, Andy is most known for his trustworthy nature and his sensitivity to human energy. “He knows just what he needs to bring to each lesson,” Kathy added.

Hall of Fame

In early 2016, LTR learned that Andy had also been selected as an inductee into the EQUUS Foundation Horse Stars Hall of Fame.

He dutifully participates in LTR’s adaptive riding, therapeutic riding and hippotherapy programs. He can drive, too; he pulls one of the center’s easy-entry carriages. “Andy’s an all-around great guy and serves many of the center’s clients,” Kathy said.

Andy joined LTR seven years ago. Catherine Wycoff, his owner and a physical therapist, offered him on a free lease. He’d served in a different therapy program prior to 2007 and was

retired for a short period of time.

“When he started getting bored, I approached LTR because I’d heard how professional and well organized the program was, and asked if they were interested in starting a hippotherapy program,” Catherine said.

“He’s attuned to his riders and can feel how fast he should move and when he needs to modulate his movement and his speed for his rider’s comfort,” she added.

“**The horses are really at the heart of what we do. People are drawn to horses and the horses are what truly make a difference in peoples’ lives.**”

— **Kathy Blaine,**
program director
at Loudoun
Therapeutic Riding

The History

LTR has the distinction of being one of the oldest, longest-running EEAT centers in the United States. In 1974, Barbara Baird, a registered nurse and a Loudoun County 4-H Leader, along with Leonard Warner, a journalist and Loudoun County Public School Board Member, proposed creating an opportunity for individuals with disabilities to connect with horses.

“Local 4-H participants and their families trailered their horses to Morven Park and loaned them to LTR for use in lessons for individuals with disabilities,” said Kathy.

The lessons were taught by a certified instructor and the 4-H families volunteered as side walkers and horse handlers. Through this arrangement, LTR was able to provide a handful of lessons each week. Several benefactors donated seed money to help the start-up get up and running. In the 1980s, the organization officially acquired horses through purchase or lease, allowing the center to reach more individuals.

Today, LTR is a PATH International Premier Accredited Center for the equine assisted activities and therapies it offers to children, adults and veterans. The center’s



Above Photo:
A young rider enjoys trotting with Loudoun Therapeutic Riding volunteers.
Photo courtesy of Loudoun Therapeutic Riding

Photo To Left:
Therapy horse Andy pulls one of the center’s carriages much to the delight of the Loudoun Therapeutic Riding clients.
Photo courtesy of Loudoun Therapeutic Riding

programs serve nearly 500 people each year through therapeutic riding, adaptive carriage driving, hippotherapy, equine services for heroes and equine-facilitated learning.

Looking Forward

Since 1995, the Morven Park, a historic 1,000-acre park in beautiful Leesburg, has generously housed LTR for low-cost rent. The space serves them well. With the rapidly expanding services and client base, LTR is in the process of building a new facility on Morven Park property.

“Since its inception over 40 years ago, LTR has remained dedicated to empowering, enhancing and enriching the lives of individuals with physical, cognitive or psychological challenges. Now we’re riding into the future, with plans for a new indoor facility,” Joanne said.

To learn more about Loudoun Therapeutic Riding visit www.ltrf.org. 

About the writer: Katie Navarra is a professional writer based in Upstate New York. She has been a lifelong horse lover and competes in ranch horse events with her dun Quarter Horse mare.

Andy, a therapy horse at Loudoun Therapeutic Riding, curls up his lip at the Washington International Horse Show while accepting the Klinger Perpetual Award for Honor & Service.
Photo by Lisa Robinson

