

HORSEBACK HAVEN

Equine therapy brings
'a little miracle' to those in need

BY MARTHA CLEMENT ROCHFORD

Turning up the slope toward the EquiCenter at the William & Mildred Levine Ranch in Honeoye Falls feels like stepping into an Andrew Wyeth painting: rolling fields, a distant barn, and a wide and peaceful expanse of sky.

Master Sergeant Luann VanPeursesem felt that peace the first time she drove up. "I was very apprehensive, but as soon as I started coming up the drive, I could feel the heaviness being lifted," she said.

That heaviness is the burden of severe post-traumatic stress. VanPeursesem is a 33-year military veteran of the United States Air Force who served multiple combat tours in Iraq. She explained her hyper-vigilance: "I've learned that complacency can kill you, so you always have to have your guard up."

But that can be devastating at home. Her everyday environment feels threatening, she said, "until I come here."

Equine therapy at the EquiCenter includes therapeutic riding and horsemanship. It can address physical injury and disability, trauma, cognitive impairment and social-emotional challenges. EquiCenter also offers therapeutic horticulture, canine-assisted therapy, adaptive yoga and dedicated programming for veterans.

While the number of veterans served by

EquiCenter continues to rise, the majority of program participants are children with special needs, and 40 percent of those children are on the autism spectrum. EquiCenter also helps individuals with cerebral palsy, stroke, multiple sclerosis, learning disabilities, eating disorders, as well as at-risk youth. CEO Jonathan Friedlander said they are also "exploring helping people with dementia and Alzheimer's, and working more with people with spinal cord injuries."

Michele Schilling has been bringing her daughter Ella to EquiCenter for over two years. "When we first brought her here, she had no muscle tone. She could only lay on the horse in a cushioned brace," Schilling said.

Schilling now watches closely as her daughter passes by on horseback, sitting upright and surrounded by her instructor and three volunteers. "Her syndrome — it's a wide range. There are children who at 10 still can't sit up." In the arena, the volunteers cheer Ella on as she reaches for a target suspended from overhead. "It took riding a horse to teach her to reach up."

Ella's family was told she would never walk. But Ruth Myers, a retired psychiatric social worker and a volunteer both in the ring and as a mental health consultant to the EquiCenter program, was in the barn the first time the



Luann VanPeursesem (left) and Ella Schilling: For both, EquiCenter has been a life-changing place. PHOTOS BY MARTHA CLEMENT ROCHFORD.



team saw Ella walk.

"Her mom was holding both her hands, and she slowly walked in. We stood there and cried." Myers added: "She's our child, too."

What is it about a horse? Karen Werth, EquiCenter's associate director of operations and a certified therapeutic riding instructor, explained that the gait of a horse involves the same movement as humans when they walk. "For someone with a special need on a horse, their body is moving in the same way as if they were walking on the ground." By extension, being on a horse "impacts the ability to process speech and language, improves social interactions and goes beyond the physical to other areas."

Stuart MacKenzie has seen it happen. His daughter Cailin was 6 when his family discovered

EquiCenter.

"We were looking for a program and Cailin has an affinity for animals, so we brought her out for a ride." Cailin was totally nonverbal and used a mechanical device to communicate. "We came back the very next week and as we drove up over the hill, Cailin said, 'Horse.' It was her first word."

Eleven years later, Cailin still rides every week and is thriving, and MacKenzie serves on the EquiCenter Board of Directors.

A substantial amount of work goes into a therapy plan before a participant ever gets in the saddle. "The instructor determines what size horse, what kind of tack," said Werth. A horse is selected based on temperament and how the horse's gait meets the specific needs of the rider.

Opportunities for veterans have been expanding creatively. "Some people would ride every day if they could, but we only have a small arena and only so many horses," Friedlander said. So more veterans are taking advantage of horsemanship, horticultural, cooking classes and yoga, as well.

For VanPeursesem, "a day with one hour of peace is a good day. We don't expect civilians to understand, but don't judge us. The horses don't — all they want to know is, 'Do you have a treat?'"

It's a frequent observation here: Horses don't judge. As Myers explained, "People who have disabilities, whether they're emotional, intellectual or physical, very often are judged by other people. But horses take you for who you are in the moment."

MacKenzie added: "We come here and disabilities disappear. It's all about abilities."

A wealth of anecdotal evidence points to the impact of equestrian therapies, but not research. Werth believes that science will catch up. "We see it every day — there's a little miracle that makes you go 'Oh!' But to the world that doesn't know horses and animals, it's a little harder to grab hold of."

MacKenzie said, "It's never been a quantified therapy, and that's one of the challenges. But as someone who had no connection to horses and had a child with special needs, we've seen the results. We live with the results. Our family is just one story." •

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Martha Clement Rochford is a Rochester freelance writer.