

Joy Miller – New Horizon Ranch - 2

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

Reuse, recycle, rebuckle. That's not exactly the popular environmental slogan, but it describes a remarkable therapeutic riding center that is using creative ways to benefit the lives of its students. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Last week we met Joy and Brian Miller, co-founders of New Horizon Ranch near Rantoul. New Horizon Ranch is a non-profit therapeutic horseback riding center which offers various kinds of equine assisted activities and learning, psychotherapy, and summer day camp programs for individuals of all ages with physical and mental disabilities.

In therapeutic riding, people with disabilities learn horsemanship and riding skills which can also benefit communication, social skills, decision-making, balance, and strength. For example, if someone is wheelchair-bound, the horse's gait simulates the movement and benefit of walking. Joy has also observed how horses can bond with the rider in beneficial ways.

"A horse has a magical ability to connect with people," Joy said. "Macho kids from inner Kansas City will come out here and say, 'This is dumb,' but within thirty minutes they're petting the horses....every time!"

There are also educational benefits of riding. "When they're on the horse, the brain is open in a different way," Joy said. "It is very kinesthetic and it stimulates motor skills. The right and left brain are working together," she said.

New Horizon Ranch also offers Silver Saddles for older adults, summer day camps, and a program called Mending Fences which helps kids repair relationships or remedy problems. The ranch also offers programs in character development which help with trust, boundary, or relationship issues. Certified therapists or mental health professionals are brought in as needed. A teacher is on staff for educational components.

There is even a program for reading to horses which helps kids gain confidence and reading skills.

When New Horizon Ranch hosted one horse show for their riders, the local Christian Youth Rodeo Association (CYRA) came to watch one of their members - a girl with a disability - ride in the show. The child rode the horse while her mom walked beside her. The girl beamed as nearly 50 people watched.

Another girl named Paige Wiseman, also a CYRA member, observed this interaction. Paige was a young rider and rodeo competitor from nearby Paola. She was a very accomplished barrel racer herself who would go on to compete in college. Paige considered how much this ride meant to that girl and pondered how to help.

"Paige contacted us and asked if it would be okay for her to donate her old rodeo buckles for the kids," Joy Miller said. "The buckles are gathering dust anyway. Why not use them?" she said.

"Paige was 12 or 13 at the time. She could have been self-absorbed with her own success, but she chose to take this step to help others," Joy said.

So, New Horizon Ranch started presenting those trophy buckles at their horse shows. They were a huge hit.

“It went so well that Paige set up a Facebook page and solicited more buckles from her friends,” Joy said. Buckles came in from all over.

According to an article in America’s Horse magazine, there were donors from such rural towns in Kansas as Plains and Kincaid, population 179 people. Now, that’s rural.

The donors found it rewarding to donate their old buckles. The kids who received them were overjoyed. “Paige said it was more meaningful to give it away than it was when she won it,” Joy said. “We put a pre-addressed card in with the buckle when it’s presented so that the donor can know where it went and the impact of their donation.” After one of New Horizon’s clients died tragically from pneumonia, his buckle meant so much to his mother that she placed it on top of the casket.

For more ranch information, see www.newhorizonranch.org.

Reuse, recycle, rebuckle. It’s not an environmental slogan, but it describes how rodeo riders are donating their old trophy buckles and making a difference for deserving kids. We commend Paige Wiseman, Joy and Brian Miller and all those involved with New Horizon Ranch for using horses – and buckles - to benefit children.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.