

# Illinois Valley Equestrian team commemorates Autism Awareness Month

By **Annette McGee Rasch**  
*IVN Senior Contributing Writer*

Unexpected rewards often come from volunteering.

For just over a year now, Selma resident Michelle Olson has donated the use of her son's horse, Bubba, to the Illinois Valley Equestrian Team. In the process, team members bonded to Olson's 14-year-old autistic son, Eric. As a result, all involved found their lives enriched.

After learning that April was Autism Awareness month, the team decided to use the Southern Oregon High School Equestrian District Meet as a vehicle to raise awareness.

"We all decided to order au-

tism awareness T-shirts to wear while competing at the meet," said Illinois Valley High School sophomore Holly McKenzie. "But they wouldn't let us wear them due to rules about dress during the competitions, so we decided to decorate our horses. And then we wore the shirts to the awards banquet."

The IV Equestrian Team members put colored hand prints all over their horses bodies and they shaved out the autism symbol, which is a heart with a puzzle piece in the middle, on the horses' hips. The kids got that idea after Olson had shaved Bubba this way at a gymkhana competition the week before.

"Everyone loved our decorations," McKenzie said. "At first, they

were kind of confused and asked what is this was for, so we explained it and they all thought it was so cool."

"I was so proud and taken back by this idea of kids making the decision to do this," Olson said. "The influence that Eric and I have had on them and their families is obvious. These kids are absolute sweethearts and education about disabilities is so important to impress on our younger generations."

"When the Olsons first moved here, we were lucky to keep Eric on Bubba for 20 minutes," said McKenzie, who goes trail riding with the Olsons. "We've worked him up to being able to ride for four hours and he loves every minute of it. He smiles and laughs. You can tell when

he's done, because he can say 'fin-ish.' Originally, they said Eric would never walk or talk and now he runs and rides and he's got a pretty good vocabulary."

"It's hard to explain, but when Eric smiles it lights up my entire world," McKenzie added. "It's very rewarding and it's so important that people recognize how people with autism are still regular people, and while they may not be able to express themselves like most of us can, it's all inside there. My own belief is that autism is a special kind of genius. Now I want to study this and work with special needs people, so meeting Eric changed my life. A lot of people think we changed his life, but it's more that he changed our lives."

Another teammate, Meghan Florez, currently rides Bubba in Cow-Pining events, because her horse is scared of cows; and last year, a foreign exchange student from China rode Bubba.

"The way Michelle lets us use Bubba for the team really inspired us, and getting to know and understand Eric has been awesome," Florez said. "You have to be really patient with kids who have autism. They learn in different ways than 'normal' kids and it's very cool to learn how they learn."

For example, when Olson is planning to take Eric somewhere the next day, she puts up a picture of the place they'll be going. The Olson family also uses pictures of the toilet or of certain foods, etc., to communicate with Eric, Florez explained.

"And you know what?" Florez said, "Eric rides Bubba really well. He also gets on the quad now. At first he didn't like the sound, but now he loves it." During the recent meet, McKenzie took second place in both Steer Dobbing and in Figure 8's and earned a fourth in Poles, qualifying her for the state level meet in Redmond on May 14, where she'll compete in three events. The team took fourth place overall in the district's Team A Bi-rangle event, and Lily Schablach and McKenzie made it into the top ten in this category. Other team members include Zach Parker, Alia Parker, Shane Garcia and Florez. "Over all, these kids did great at the meet," Olson said. "They're a very small team out here in the IV, and they've got a lot of compassion for others. I think it's very sweet that a group of kids, coaches and parents took it upon themselves to spread the autism word during this last meet. Coaches Desiree Eddy and Alicia Kinsey have done an excellent job in making sure the kids have fun in this sport that can be so competitive."

This team's cohesive spirit is exemplified in its current plans to accompany McKenzie to the upcoming state meet so they can all support her in person.



Lily Schablach (left), Alia Parker, Zach Parker, Meghan Flores (flag), and Holly McKenzie

(Courtesy photo from The Illinois Valley News)

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