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Horses have an amazing - some say spiritual - capacity to connect with and help people coping with emotional or physical disabilities, and no one knows that better than the skilled horsewomen who run Healing Hearts and Hooves, an Illinois Valley-based therapeutic horse-back riding program in its seventh year of operation.

The program is run from August Moon Ranch on Holland Loop and serves about 15 students, three Sunday's per month, from June through mid-October. And since several long-term students moved out of state - there's room for new participants in classes held at 9:30 and 11 a.m. and at 12:30 p.m. While the cost is \$20 per session, some funding is available for those who get by on lower incomes, and coordinators don't want anyone to stay away because of money.

"We see children that have a lot of issues, some of them serious, but out here, they're all smiling and happy," said program founder Shelley Herndon.

Illinois Valley High School's new principal, Tanner Smith, has a son, Trevor, 4, who was

diagnosed with slight autism and doctors told him that "the best thing is early intervention" and working with horses was one of the suggested therapies.

"When you let someone put your 4-year-old on a horse, you need to feel really comfortable. And we do. They treat Trevor like he's their own kid," Smith said. "All the instructors, volunteers and trainers are awesome people, they work with those kids so well, you can see how much they care. They're saints."

"With good therapy, Trevor may grow beyond the autism spectrum, and it's just amazing, the results in this program. He's doing things we didn't we didn't think he'd do," Smith added. "To see the smile on his face, ear-to-ear, it's a great feeling."

Healing Hearts and Hooves got its start in 2009, when Herndon and her daughter, Renee Herndon, asked local horse trainer Connie Hicks to help them get the ball rolling.

"Our program is principally available for our local population," Hicks said. "With JoCo as underserved as it is, we want to get the word out to the various special education and social service programs, to let

them know that we're here and accepting new students and looking for more volunteers."

Hicks said hippotherapy (equine assisted therapy) can help both children and adults with Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, PTSD, and a broad range of physical or emotional disorders.

The art of utilizing horses to help people heal is ancient. Around 460 B.C. Greeks developed hippotherapy for the rehabilitation of muscles weakened by disease or trauma. They noticed improvement in movement, strength and coordination in their patients, and today hippotherapy is widely recognized and embraced worldwide.

Herndon, a certified therapeutic instructor, said sometimes people think an injury or disability is too serious to be appropriate for the program, but explained that her team always finds ways to enable even the most severely afflicted individuals to benefit from contact with the horses.

"The horses give so much and they always do their job," Herndon said. And Hicks said that their horses are quite intuitive about interacting with the students. She added that the horses are all well-trained and possess the



(Courtesy photo for the Illinois Valley News)

Jim (left), Angelina and Tanya at the August Moon Ranch.

right temperament for the job. Also, "side-walkers" on each side of the horse ensure that the students stay safely in the saddle.

Hicks also hope to bring more veterans into the program, either as volunteers, or students - or both.

"Years ago, I had a vet in my program in Florida, an amputee," Hicks said. "He would come for his lesson and take off his leg to ride. He said he 'felt in tune' with the horse while

he rode. After his lesson he'd strapped his leg back on and volunteer for a few hours. He said he loved the program and got so much out of it, not only for himself, but also, he was so happy to work with those kids."

Herndon and Hicks hope to cultivate more participation from the Valley. "It's not just the students who get a lot out of it, the volunteers really get a lot out of it as well," Herndon said.

Hicks said that teenagers make great volunteers and often find themselves gaining a different perspective when volunteering, particularly when working with younger children with severe disabilities.

Herndon also wants to reach out to those who might feel a little shy about contacting the program. "Sometimes it's hard to admit that you need help," she said. "When people realize that they could qualify for this program, well, it's kind of admitting that you need some support, and sometimes it can take a lot for people to admit to that. But if people come out and get involved, then they often get a sense that others have it worse than they do. Helping others can help people get beyond thinking about their own problems too much."

Cave Junction resident Catalina Hill has 8-year-old twin daughters enrolled in the program. The girls have some learning disabilities. Hill also volunteers, along with her older daughter, Lydia, 16, who is "really into horses." It's a win-win scenario for the whole family, who are all horse crazy. "We've really seen progress with emotional development since the twins have been involved with the program, and for Lydia, she's so happy because she gets to work with the horses."

Hicks related how another student, a little girl, who has been with the program for a few years, tends to have "these outbursts. But she's getting much better now."

Herndon added that horses have a way of putting you in your place, "you can't fool them like you like you can your parents," she said.

Call Herndon at 541-659-1798 for more information about the program.

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