



Staff photo by E.J. Harris
Brasen Newsom mounts Libby, a Norwegian Fjord horse, as volunteers Obie Fordice and Tessa Irvine look on Wednesday at Dream Catcher Therapeutics in Pendleton.



Staff photo by E.J. Harris
Ashley Haapla, left, watches her son, Brasen Newsom, 10, during a riding lesson at Dream Catcher Therapeutics on Wednesday in Pendleton.

Healing with horse power

Nonprofit provides therapeutic horseback riding for children

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

Ashley Haapla started out as a skeptic of therapeutic horseback riding.

The Pendleton resident described herself as “super not country” who was more familiar with the buses and trains of her native Seattle than equine travel.

But her mind changed when Sherwood Heights Elementary started sending her 10-year-old son, Brasen Newsom, and other special education students to Dream Catcher Therapeutics.

“There’s something about the power of a horse,” she said.

While still not an avid horsewoman, Haapla is now a Dream Catcher board member as it looks to expand its reach at a new location.

This summer, Haapla decided to take Brasen to Dream Catcher for personal therapy sessions twice a week at the nonprofit’s ranch south of Pendleton.

As a child with autism, Brasen is non-verbal and is still learning to read and write, but words aren’t needed to see that he’s enjoying himself.

A broad grin occasionally bursts from Brasen as he clamors aboard the sandy-colored back of Libby, a Norwegian Fjord and one of four horses used for therapeutic riding by Dream Catcher.

Dream Catcher Executive Director Morgan Matteson and two volunteers guide Libby as they direct Brasen to stretch his arms, play a catch and drop rings onto cones.

He sometimes fussed with his helmet or smacked himself in the head when a ring bounces off the cone, but it was otherwise a smooth ride, with Brasen silently raising his hands in the air in victory when a ring found its way around a cone.

Haapla said Brasen is normally



Staff photo by E.J. Harris
Norwegian Fjords Libby and Smily are holdouts from the previous Dream Catcher program and are used in therapy programs due to their mild temperament.

even more cheerful when he straps on a saddle, but his mood might have been a little dulled from a sleepless night inspired by the news that he would be going to Dream Catcher the next day.

“He gets pretty happy up there,” she said. “If he could stay up there all day, he would.”

Matteson said therapeutic horseback riding has a calming effect on people with autism, which opens up time to develop motor skills through the exercises like ring-and-cone activity.

Autism isn’t the only condition riding therapy can help treat. Matteson said riding therapy has helped students with Down syndrome, multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy, post-traumatic stress disorder and other conditions.

Matteson said not any horse can work for therapeutic riding, which requires a docile animal with the ability to meet the ridership needs of the student. She referenced one horse

that allowed a student to steer it with her teeth because she didn’t have any arms.

Dream Catcher’s mission isn’t new, but the scope of its ambition is.

Rebecca Adams co-founded Dream Catcher in 2001, motivated by her own son’s cerebral palsy.

The original incarnation of Dream Catcher was a “mom and pop” operation, Adams said. The activities were run out of Adams’ house near Mission and were overseen by a three-person board.

Although a smaller board meant they had greater control over operations, Adams said it also meant that Dream Catcher went through extended periods of closure when life got in the way.

At the beginning of 2017, Dream Catcher re-organized with the intention of becoming a more professional organization.

The ranch moved south, the board was expanded and the nonprofit turned

to a face from its past to become its new director.

Matteson was a volunteer from Dream Catcher’s early days, a time that inspired her to pursue a degree at Rocky Mountain College’s therapeutic horsemanship program in Billings, Montana.

Matteson worked at therapy centers in Siletz and other Oregon towns before deciding to return home, where she got the call from Adams to return to Dream Catcher as the executive director.

With Matteson at the helm and Adams on the board overseeing the transition, Dream Catcher’s goal is to become a more permanent presence in the area.

Grants from the Wildhorse Foundation and the Pendleton Foundation Trust helped pay for new equipment and Matteson is looking into gaining access to an indoor facility to keep Dream Catcher operating during inclement weather.

Dream Catcher currently has seven students and eight volunteers and is looking to expand both pools.

Matteson said volunteers are crucial to the organization, especially since some students require assistance to stay on the horse while its in motion.

Equine experience isn’t needed, which was evidenced by the two volunteers who helped Brasen through his ride.

Although volunteer Tess Irvine spent her life around horses, Obie Fordice was actually intimidated by them until he started volunteering for Dream Catcher.

“Money isn’t the only thing that makes (Dream Catcher) run,” Adams said.

People interested in volunteering at Dream Catcher can contact Matteson at 541-377-1479.

Contact Antonio Sierra at asierra@eastoregonian.com or 541-966-0836.



Staff photo by E.J. Harris
Brasen Newsom, 10, gets help picking a horse’s hoof with Dream Catcher Therapeutics executive director Morgan Matteson before starting a riding lesson Wednesday in Pendleton.