

Therapeutic Horses & Hounds

Animal therapy groups assist kids and adults with disabilities

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Provided

Sheyenne Morris, 14, takes therapy-riding lessons at Rein and Shine. She not only rides, but also helps take care of the horses as well.

Sheyenne Morris has always loved animals. But as much as she loves horses, she wanted to keep both feet on the ground. As a child with Down syndrome, Sheyenne didn't feel comfortable sitting on the horse until another child with Down syndrome showed her how.

Sheyenne is 14 and takes therapy-riding lessons at Rein and Shine, a nonprofit organization located in Awendaw that offers therapeutic riding lessons for children and adults with disabilities. It is a NARHA (North American Riding for the Handicapped Association) certified therapy facility.

Sheyenne has learned to steer a horse all by herself and to trot at two-point, a riding position used for jumps.

Sheyenne is currently learning the difference between right and left while riding the horse. The therapist tells her to go right, and she has to decide which direction that is. She even helps take care of the horse before and after the therapy session by putting on the saddle and girth and cleaning the horse's hooves.

Sheyenne's mom, Julie Morris, says she loves Rein and Shine because the people have always been so nice to her and to Sheyenne. If Sheyenne misses a lesson or can't ride because of bad weather, they'll let her come to the barn and feed carrots to the horses.

"She's happiest when she's up on those horses," Morris says.

The organization offers lessons to children and adults with disorders ranging from multiple sclerosis to autism to people affected by brain aneurisms and strokes.

"We cater to all different disabilities. There's no limit, as long as we have a doctor's authorization that the riding won't cause problems," says Mackie Moore, executive director of Rein and Shine.

While therapy lessons can be expensive, Moore says they will never turn away someone who can't afford it. Rein and Shine offers scholarships paid for with donations and proceeds from a horsemanship program for adults and children without disabilities who want to learn to ride.

Rein and Shine isn't just a horse farm and has recently added some new animals to its growing family. The organization now has a 500-pound pig, two donkeys, four wild pigs that roamed in from the forest, cows, and two three-legged dogs. Moore says the kids love the animals and the animals open them up.

"The parents always tell me that their child is at peace after they leave."



Photo by Shannon Brigham

Ellie Romine, 4, of Mount Pleasant, is assisted by Jennifer Hoffman, volunteer and board member, as she rides Raldiene, a therapy horse.

Another student at Rein and Shine is 4-year-old Ellie Romine. Ellie has a mild case of cerebral palsy and has been riding there for about two years.

Ellie's mom, Christie Romine, explains that Ellie's lessons focus on improving her gait, core strength and balance. For example, while Ellie is riding the horse, she has to reach out and grab a toy from a bucket, working her core muscles. Romine says she's seen a huge improvement in Ellie's walk and coordination.

"Every time my family sees her, they say she's so much better at walking. We've especially seen a tremendous improvement with her gait pattern."

Ellie also goes to speech therapy twice a week, and even the riding helps with her speech. As her core, neck and muscle strength improve, her speech will also get better. And Romine says that just being on the horse and in an outside environment is very stimulating to speech.

"When kids go to therapy in a sterile environment, it's just not fun to do it indoors and it takes a lot of work to keep their attention. But put her on a horse, and that's exciting."

Horses aren't the only animals used for therapy in the Charleston area. In February, Charleston Children's Therapy Center began using a dog in their therapy sessions.

Bimmer is an 18-month-old German Shepherd trained by a nonprofit organization in Greenville called Dogs for Autism, which trains dogs for families that have an autistic child. Each dog is matched and trained for a specific family to meet their particular needs.

Charlene Durham, co-owner of Charleston Children's Therapy Center, says that Bimmer is the first dog that Dogs for Autism has placed in a therapy center. Since it's not realistic for all families to have a dog, Dogs for Autism wanted to provide another option.

After six months of working out the details, Durham went to Greenville for a weekend to pick up and train with Bimmer. He now lives with her and goes to the therapy center about twice a week.

"We are trying to come up with ways to use him as a treatment tool, and it's going well so far."



Photo by Shannon Brigham

Jackson Paccapaniccia, 4, of Goose Creek, loves his therapy sessions with Bimmer, an 18-month old German Shepherd trained to work with children with special needs.

Jackson Paccapaniccia of Goose Creek has been working with Bimmer since the dog arrived. The 4-year-old was diagnosed with pervasive developmental disorder two years ago, and this is his first experience working with a therapy animal.

His mom Jennifer Paccapaniccia says that although Jackson has always enjoyed going to physical therapy, he likes it even more now that Bimmer is there.

"There's a lot of routine to the therapy, with the goals they have, and to have an animal to do it with makes it that much more enjoyable."

She says it has helped with his transition behaviors, or meltdowns caused when moving from one activity to another that are common in children with spectrum disorders.

"He sometimes has a hard time switching gears from one activity to the next but having the dog guiding him come out and go in with him helps with the behavior. It helps him to settle them down, to adjust and move on. It's nice for Mommy."

The therapy center offers occupational, physical and speech therapy that involves Bimmer. Durham says they are just starting to discover all the ways he can help. For example, if a child is weak on one side, the therapist will have the child use that side to groom and brush Bimmer to strengthen motor skills.

Bimmer also works in the gym helping sometimes-reluctant children go through an obstacle course. The therapist will have the child go first and have Bimmer follow.

Durham says Bimmer even has a big effect in speech therapy.

"Having the dog present has produced spontaneous speech. The children are more willing to talk with the dog than the person in the room."

The therapists at Charleston Children's therapy are still exploring how they can use Bimmer, but so far the children love having him in the room.

"Some kids are becoming regulars with Bimmer because it just works so well."