

'Best Of Friends' Offers More Than A Good Time

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*I saw a child who could only crawl
mount a horse and sit up tall.
Put it through degrees of paces
and laugh at the wonder on our faces.
I saw a child born into strife,
Take up and hold the reins of life
and that same child was heard to say,
Thank God for showing me the way. . .*

John Anthony Davies

MINERAL POINT (Cambria Co.) — "Best of Friends" is a non-profit group, affiliated with the 4-H program in Cambria County. The above verse appears on the front of their printed brochure. The verse reflects the basic premise of "Best of Friends" who provide therapeutic horseback riding for individuals who are either mentally, physically, or emotionally challenged.

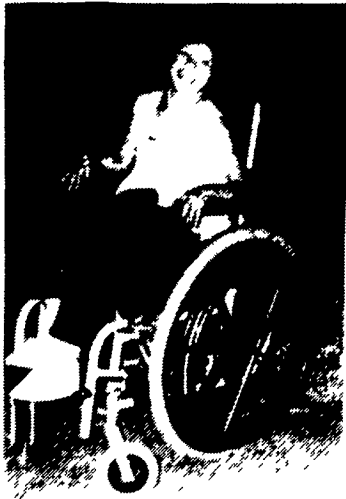
The program has been in existence since 1983 in Cambria County. During the past six years the group has been located at Rose Hill Stables, Mineral Point RD, which has an indoor riding arena. Previous to this, they were located at the Triple R Ranch in Nicktown.

Rose Hill, owned and operated by Jerry and Sharon Varner, board the horses for the organization. The Varner's daughter, Heidi, is the volunteer logkeeper for the riding program. Karen Stickler, volunteer coordinator of "Best of Friends" credits the Varners with being very accommodating. Because of the indoor riding facilities, Karen's job is a little easier — alternate scheduling is not necessary due to inclement weather. When the weather permits, outdoor trail rides are featured.

Karen, a resident of Vinco, has been the organization's volunteer coordinator for the past 12 years. The board of directors, oversees the basic operation of the group. Karen schedules the instructors, as well as more than 70 volunteers.

A record of stirrup size is kept for each rider. The horse that best fits the needs of each individual rider is assigned. Scheduling of lessons is done with keeping in mind the needs of each rider and the parent's work schedule. Sometimes Karen and the instructors have to do a lot of "juggling" to make everything work smoothly each week.

The Cambria County program is unique in the respect that it is a total volunteer effort. At the present time there are five instructors: Cathy Homer, Lois Headrick, Kim Pesarchic, Debbie Druzak, and Joe Bennett. These instructors are all familiar with horses and have



Jenna Morgan, age 8, of Patton, PA grinning from "ear to ear" after her riding lesson. (Jenna has cerebral palsy.)



Leader Sherri Jarabak, and "side-walkers" Denise Farabaugh and Kelli Bartlebaugh with rider Andrea Damin, age 12, of Ebensburg. (Andrea and Kim are twins.)



Kim Damin, age 12, of Ebensburg, mounting "Job." With her are Instructors, Cathy Homer and Lois Headrick.



Amanda Lacko, age 12, of Summerhill, atop "Yankee." According to her mother, Amanda, who is autistic, has developed a better sense of balance and posture because of the therapeutic horseback riding.

attended the intensive training program for therapeutic riding in State College. They also screen prospective horses for the program.

The volunteers are the backbone of the organization and Karen and the other instructors think quite highly of them. The only requirement is that they be at least 14 years old and have a willingness to work. Horse experience is not necessary but only those who have experience with horses can train to be leaders. Others are "side-walkers." Each rider requires three volunteers — leader and two "side-walkers."

Short training sessions are conducted for anyone who wishes to be a volunteer. Most of the teenage volunteers not only can fulfill their school or church service hour requirements but also come away with a good sense of accomplishment. Volunteers are also used to groom and tack the horses before the sessions and to care for them afterwards.

Another unique feature of the Cambria County-based program is that it encompasses more than just county residents. Due to the fact that this type of organization is not available in all areas of the state, some riders travel quite a distance to participate — in Cambria County, some riders have come from as far away as Indiana and Osceola Mills.

Horseback riding is thought to be one of the best forms of therapeutic recreation for handicapped

persons. Besides helping to build self-confidence, it also strengthens and relaxes muscles, improves posture, balance, and coordination — in a way that is fun for the individual.

Riding also gives the handicapped person a feeling of complete freedom and mobility. One parent was quite pleased after her wheelchair-bound son went on an outdoor trail ride. The boy could talk of nothing else for days — how nice the woods smelled, and how pretty and green everything was. For a short while, he was just like everyone else and his horse provided him with the necessary mobility.

Gaye Lacko, of Summerhill, has a 12-year-old autistic daughter, Amanda. Amanda has been a member of "Best of Friends" for four years. According to her mother, Amanda has had success with following directions, increased her attention span, and improved her posture. Gaye attributes this to the hard work of the staff of "Best of Friends." Amanda has also achieved marked improvement in hand-eye coordination. The "fun" therapy for this is done while carrying an egg on a spoon and putting rings on a peg — both while on horseback.

Twelve-year-old twins, Andrea and Kim Damin of Ebensburg, are enrolled in the program for the first year. Their mother, Janet, remarked that the twins really seem to like the movement while riding

the horses and they thoroughly enjoy their riding sessions. Terry Morgan, Patton area resident, brings eight-year-old daughter, Jenna. Jenna, who has cerebral palsy, enjoys the program and her mother feels that Jenna really appreciates the mobility. She also stated that Jenna looks forward to each Monday (the day on which she goes horseback riding). Another parent said that her child is envied by his peers because he takes riding lessons. This is something that none of the others in the neighborhood do and the distinction makes this child "special."

Currently, there are 24 riders involved in the program. Because it is a 4-H program there is a minimum age of eight and all riders are considered to be 4-H members. There is no upper age limit. The riders' fee is \$10 per session with the summer program consisting of 10 sessions. In the fall, two more sessions for each rider will be offered on Saturdays. All fees are used for boarding the horses. Members of the board are always looking for donations from groups or individuals to help cover the costs of "boarding" or to "sponsor" the rider if there is a "need."

"Best of Friends" owns three horses: "Job," "Yankee," and "Lady." Instructor Cathy Homer, who donated the first horse to the group, points out that when the group looks for a new horse there is a rigorous screening process.

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