

Animals provide joyful therapy for kids with disabilities

Cheryl Coppinger, CHG

A child walks down the drive toward her family's car, ready for the ride home. She turns back with a wistful look. "Is there something I can do for you?" I ask.

"Yes," she replies. "I want to see the dog."

Two short whistles and Shilo is at my side. Ashley approaches and Shilo rolls over, offering her belly. Ashley makes a couple of tentative strokes and then gives Shilo a vigorous rub. Smiling and proud, Ashley feels her accomplishment.

Normal, everyday behavior for some, maybe, but not for Ashley. A year ago, the sight of Shilo or animals in general produced extreme anxiety. Today Ashley not only embraces the opportunity, but she rides a full-size horse with authority.

Ashley looks forward to Monday nights and her appointed time in the saddle. She is masterful as she guides her horse around the arena, building confidence as her abilities mature.

Picture Brian, a budding teenager with downcast eyes who withdraws from his surroundings. He mounts Sham without a word to begin his first riding lesson.

Ten minutes into the session, the riding instructor brings Brian and the horse back to the arena fence. "Brian's going to ride bareback," she says. I jump to get the proper equipment, but then I'm told bareback means exactly that — no riding pad or other assists, just bareback. Brian dismounts, the saddle is quickly removed and he's on the horse again.

Just as quickly, Brian leans over his horse's neck and embraces him. Fear is not what we see — we witness, instead, a boy and a horse bonding. Quietly, Brian extends himself to the point of lying completely stretched out and relaxed. He and Sham have become one.

With spotters on both sides, Sham is asked to walk forward. Brian smiles. Forty minutes later, his lesson ends and — just as wordlessly — Brian gets down.

The following week, Brian begins his lesson — again bareback. Once more he lies down and rides, moving his head from one side of Sham's neck to the other. No fear is evidenced. He just wants to feel the horse and all his movements.

The instructor stops and asks Brian to sit up and turn around backwards. Without hesitation, Brian swings around and, just as quickly, lies down again. His head on Sham's rump, legs slightly crossed over his neck, Brian is comfortable.

Sham steps forward. As he does, Brian reaches down and takes hold of Sham's flanks on both sides. The instructor and I gasp, for most horses would now buck or move away from the hands. But I look into Sham's eyes and see understanding, acceptance and love. Sham realizes the significances of Brian's trust and his desire to embrace Sham's every move.



Katelyn has discovered that life's simple pleasures include interactions with horses.

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Katelyn arrives, smiling, with her mother. She's dressed in her finest western wear. Mother and child approach the arena where a horse named Coque patiently awaits. Immediately the smile vanishes, however, as Shilo barks and the terrified Katelyn covers her ears.

A quick word and Shilo is silenced, but Katelyn faces another challenge; a riding helmet is necessary and she's afraid of the buckling process. Gently, the helmet is buckled and Katelyn walks up the ramp to mount her horse.

She's picked up and placed in the saddle. The exhilaration is almost overwhelming, and then Coque walks forward. Katelyn is riding. All anxiety is gone, and she's riding.

I look back, and her mom is openly weeping. It's hard to believe that for years everyone has denied Katelyn this simple pleasure. Her parents have looked and looked for a way to fulfill the dream that is now being realized.

Eighteen months later, Katelyn doesn't shudder when a helmet is buckled on her head, nor does she pay any attention when Shilo barks. She notices the barking, but doesn't need to cover her ears.

These three children may not seem remarkable, but they are. Each has a disability to deal with daily — a constant reminder that he or she can't do what other children take for granted.

They've joined a riding program designed for individuals with disabilities. The program is called SHAM, for Special Horses Aiding Miracles. The horse Sham and his neighing buddies, Shilo the dog, and a menagerie of goats and other animals give these special children love, acceptance and the ability to take control. Nothing equals the pride of knowing that a 1,000-pound animal is responding to your commands.

These wonderful animals are my "children." They have a unique understanding and acceptance of individuals with disabilities. They want to be a part of the lives of the young people who come to ride weekly. ♦

For years, Coppinger also has regularly hosted the clients of The Arc of Tri-Cities for riding sessions at her area ranch, with the help of volunteers from Hanford's National Management Association chapter and other Hanford groups. The Arc is a United Way agency that helps the developmentally disabled.