

Interns help kids ride tallInterns lend a hand at horse-riding therapy center

Projects boost horse therapy.

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Karen Grindler called out names as she handed out blue ribbons for most improved, best trot and a slew of other superlatives to the horseback riders at Cedar Creek Therapeutic Riding Center.

But it isn't just the riders who have grown this summer, said Grindler, the founder and executive director of the center, which has provided horseback-riding therapy to people with disabilities since 1988. For the past three summers, she has had students from the occupational therapy assistant program at Moberly Area Community College working as interns.

Grindler said over the past eight weeks, she saw the interns go from being nervous to making friends with the riders and working hands-on with them. In the summer, she said, it's harder to find volunteers because many students leave town.

"We're lucky to have them come out here," Grindler said of the MACC students, who spent Thursday afternoons working with riders at the center.

"This gives them the opportunity to work with just about every disability you can think of, including cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, multiple sclerosis, autism and traumatic brain injury," she said.

As part of their internships, the six MACC students this summer had to complete a project. Intern Annie Cruse and her group made basketball hoops while a second group made hand-washing stations. The children at Cedar Creek play basketball on horseback, Cruse said.

"A lot of the kids have disabilities where they can't play basketball — they're in a wheelchair or they have braces on their legs," she said. "So this makes them feel like everyone else."

Cruse said she enjoyed watching the children play basketball, not only because of the joy she could see on their faces but also because of the physical progress they were making.

"We pay attention to how the kids are positioned on the horse, how they are sitting up, holding themselves and how they are able to reach," she said.

Cruse said these are all skills the riders must have on a daily basis, but being on a horse gives them an extra

challenge.

Intern Kayla Helton said her final afternoon volunteering last week was bittersweet.

"You get to see so much progress in just eight weeks," she said.

Helton said on her first visit to Cedar Creek, she worked with a girl who wouldn't even talk to her. "Now she's talking and laughing. I'm definitely going to have to come back and visit," she said.

Intern Becky Barrett said her time volunteering at Cedar Creek has inspired her to try to open her own therapeutic-riding center one day. "I have really learned a lot and learned how much" riding "benefits the clients," Barrett said.

Barrett said besides the physical help — with balance, coordination and relaxing the muscles — riding has affected the clients' personalities. "If they're having a bad day, they get on the horse, and it just brightens their day, and" they "look forward to coming back," she said.

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