



Riding Toward Friendships

BY BROOKE HAFETS

"Only when we are no longer afraid do we begin to live."

—Dorothy Thompson

Cheryl Carsten was feeling very brave the day she called the National Ability Center, demanding help for her son with autism. A very social person herself, Cheryl was extremely hurt that children were not seeking out her son for friendship. She believes that every parent wants their child to be loved and accepted, and to feel like they belong. Determined to help develop his social skills, she proposed a therapeutic riding class to help him learn about relationships. Finding such a program intriguing, the National Ability Center (NAC) agreed to accept the idea and start a group horseback riding lesson.

"I wanted to initiate a pilot program through the NAC to help facilitate social skills with typically developing peers. The purpose was to create an environment where the boys would be given a natural atmosphere of friendship to generalize social skills," explained Cheryl, mother and program creator.

Cheryl's two sons, Grant and David, are both on the higher end of the autism spectrum; however, Grant, her older son, is currently working on his social skills. Grant, seven, and David, five, both have a very rare seizure disorder called Landau-Kleffner, which affects the communication and language part of their brains. Basically, every time the boys have a seizure, they lose a little more of their language, and therefore "regress" in their social skills. Luckily, there are medications and special diets, which Cheryl uses to help prevent more seizures. Because of Cheryl's awareness of the disorder in her son Grant, she was able to recognize the symptoms in David early, so his disability is less severe than Grant's.

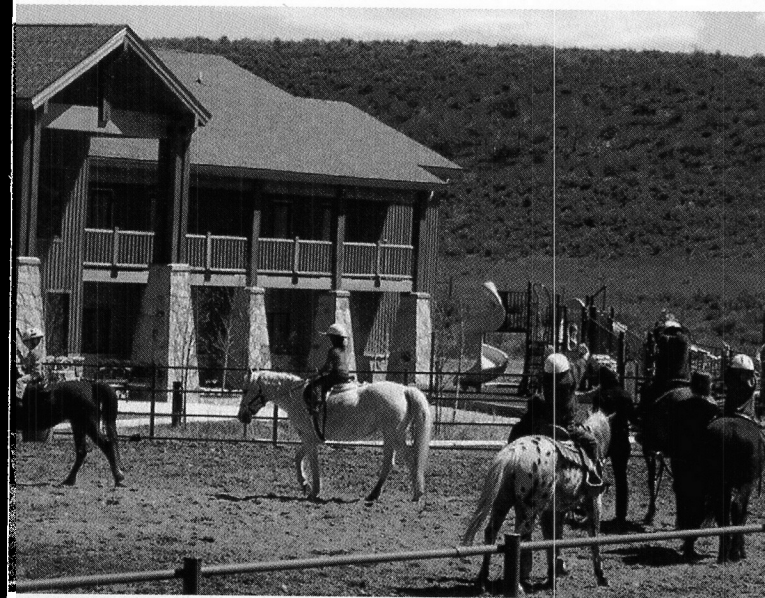
According to Cheryl, as a result of Grant's disability, he links socialization with pain, because people are unpredictable. "This program is my way to link social-



ization with fun and excitement," explained Cheryl, since Grant was already enjoying and succeeding in private horseback riding lessons for the past two years. Grant had already mastered many riding skills, and even took a first place at the NAC's horse show last fall. With this in mind, Cheryl thought that this would be a great opportunity to combine something Grant enjoys with a therapeutic experience.

Cheryl got in touch with Jessica Day, the equestrian program manager at the NAC, to help to design the ideal program format. The two decided to work with a group of four children, Grant and three other typically developing peers. The peers are neighbors, classmates, or schoolmates in the same grade, that Grant sees everyday. They selected the one to three ratio because that is the group size Grant is in at school in his classroom, which seems to work well. In a typical lesson, there is one instructor who leads the lesson, and one volunteer per child to help them tack the horse and to groom. All of the kids have one volunteer, so no one is seen as special, or seen as needing extra help.

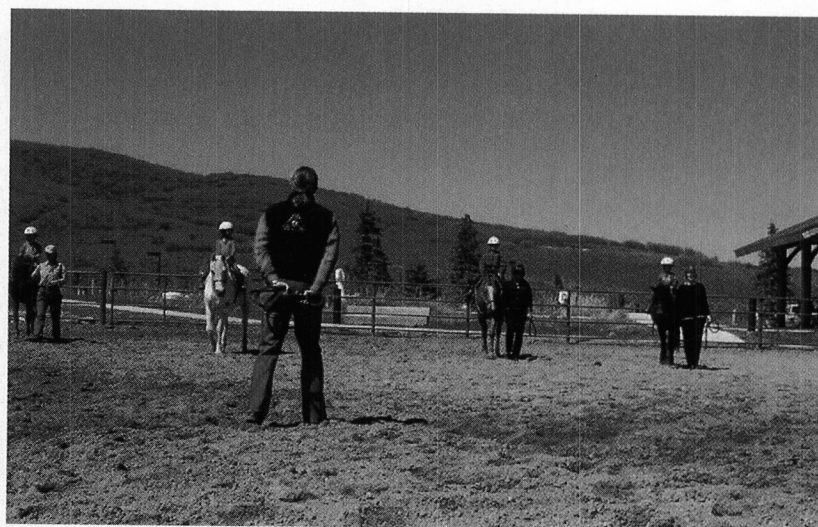
When the kids arrive at the NAC Ranch, they begin their lesson in the barn by getting their helmets on and selecting their horse's grooming equipment. "Grant, who had been to the barn before, was able to show the others how to put on their helmets and use



with each member of the group. In addition, during the lesson, the children will learn riding skills and do balancing and steering exercises. Occasionally they will go for trail rides, but there is always a social emphasis on all that they do.

Once they are riding, they work on their warm-up exercises, which are usually games. They will play "follow the leader," "Simon says," have team relays, and sometimes sing songs.

Throughout these lessons, the volunteer with Grant will give him certain cues to help him focus on the instructor. "For example, if the instructor said 'good job Madeline,' we would say 'Grant, look what Madeline is doing,' or 'Grant listen to Christie,'" said John Blalock, the volunteer who works with Grant. Although sometimes just saying



his name or touching his leg will help bring him to focus. This lesson format also helps with guided practice. John, who has a degree in therapeutic recreation, noted that Grant is a visual learner, and this lesson helps to visually represent the skills—he can watch what other group members are doing. Cheryl also believes that this format helps Grant with social referencing. Grant can look at the others and ask himself, "am I ok, am I safe? Yes, they are ok, they are safe." It also allows Grant a chance to be emotionally attuned to his friends.

When Grant first changed from private lessons to the group format, he did not really like it. So Cheryl hired Gail Stark, a special education teacher and autism specialist to help transition Grant from school to home to the barn, and to prepare him for the group lessons. Gail worked with Grant on structured peer

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brushes, he was able to be an 'expert' for a first time," explained Jessica. After joining their volunteer, they will either groom their own horse, or all work together to groom and tack one horse. Once they are riding, they work on their warm-up exercises, which are usually games. They will play "follow the leader," "Simon says," have team relays, and sometimes sing songs that compare their anatomy to that of the horse. These games are designed to be social games, and not focus as much on their riding skills. They will also set up obstacle courses to ride through and practice a phrase like "hello, how are you," at each obstacle,



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play. She would take Grant from school to his house with a school friend, who was also in his riding lesson. They would play games to do with horses or the barn at home, and then in the car on the way to the NAC, they would have what Gail calls "pre-talk" about what they were going to do when they were at the barn. Cheryl felt that this was the most important piece to Grant's enjoyment of the group lessons, and to his development of lifelong friendships.

"Since Grant has been peer horseback riding, he has made connections with those children specifically," Cheryl explained, "and those relationships have transferred to other situations." Grant will play on the playground now with his peers and they often play "cow-

boy" together. Children are starting to include Grant in their activities, like birthday parties. There is even a waiting list for typically developing peers to ride with Grant. Children are asking Grant if they can ride with him—using him as an instrument to do what they want to do.

"There have been many benefits from his riding lessons," said Cheryl. "Grant's upper body strength and balance have increased. When he leaves the barn, he is more attentive, and his language is more lucid and articulate. They recognize their volunteers around town and want to talk to them." Even

Grant's speech and language teacher has seen improvements in Grant's social skills. But for Cheryl, the most amazing thing is that her children are developing true relationships.

One of the interesting side effects Jessica, the program manager, sees is the change in the typically developing peers. According to her, the outcome Cheryl wants is for her child to develop friendships. "This lesson format was designed so that all of the kids can interact in an equal setting, so that when they are on the playground or in recess, other kids can recognize the differences, but can still have an exchange," she said. Jessica believes that this group has given the peers an ability to communicate and bond with Grant.

Those peers are not only accepting Grant, but also learning how to help each other and nurture each other. Grant even has a little girlfriend now, Gabriella, who he

rides with and sits with in class. According to Lindsay Hernandez, Gabriella's mom, she was passing notes in class one day, during silent writing time, and she passed one to Grant. The note said, "I like you, would you like to come over to play?" Grant wrote back! He said that he would like that. Since then, they eat together, play together, and ride together. Because of riding, Gabriella does not see Grant as being different.

While Grant is involved in many different activities to improve his social skills, from piano lessons to speech and language therapy, the horseback riding lessons at the National Ability Center have proven to have really helped him make friends and build on those skills. Cheryl knows that the horseback riding program has been therapeutic for her boys, and she is thrilled that the NAC has offered her children a chance to reach their full potential without limits. "I always feel like I am going past my boundary to get my children what they need," Cheryl admitted, "but it is out of my love for them, and my wanting them to get their full potential."

About the National Ability Center

Located in Park City, Utah, the National Ability Center offers year-round affordable outdoor sports and recreational experiences for individuals with disabilities and their families. The center hopes to empower individuals with disabilities and foster their desires to lead normal lives. The center does this through programs that include horseback riding, water skiing, cycling, swimming, canoeing, river rafting, scuba diving, snorkeling, indoor climbing, adventure learning retreats and camps, alpine skiing and snowboarding, nordic skiing and bobsledding. In addition to offering professional adaptive instruction, the Ability Center also provides adaptive equipment for each of its programs.

From the Ability Center's 26-acre fully accessible Recreation Center and Ranch, located in the mountains of Park City, Utah, the center now provides well over 20,000 lessons a year in nearly 20 different areas of sports and recreation. For those individuals and groups interested in visiting from out of state or just looking for a mountain getaway, the National Ability Center has a 26 double-occupancy bunkhouse, complete with wheelchair accessible rooms, a kitchen, cafeteria, and workout room.

As a non-profit organization, rates are often below cost; however, scholarships are provided to those in need. For more information or to become a participant, please call (435) 649-3991 or visit our website at www.nac1985.org.

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