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Healing on horseback Therapeutic riding 'like magic'

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR-BANNER

CITRA — Twice a month, 14 students from the special education program at Belleview High School get to visit a special place.

They can strengthen their muscles, improve their ability to pay attention and follow directions, achieve goals and improve their self-esteem and social skills.

Stirrups 'n Strides Therapeutic Riding Center Inc. is a nonprofit horse ranch at Hi-Time Farm in Citra.

The students have the opportunity to ride and drive horses as part of a therapeutic program that has been proven to improve the quality of life in people with disabilities, whether they are physical, mental or emotional.

"The animals are like magic to anyone with a disability," said Betty Gray, director of the center, which has 45 students ranging in age from 3 to their 60s.

Gray said she has seen someone walk for the first time after receiving therapeutic riding lessons at the center.

One of her many autistic students spoke for the very first time, whispering his horse's name. His parents were astonished.

"The riders, like everyone else, need goals, so a lot of our focus here is on competition," Gray said. "You can't fathom what it does for these athletes to win a competition."

Christine Barnes, 19, especially enjoys riding the horses. She has benefited from the program and improved so much she is training for the Special Olympics.



Zoom

Christine Barnes, left, trots on Knickee, a Morgan, as Lyn Butler guides her at Stirrups 'N Strides Therapeutic Riding Center on in Citra on Thursday. Students from the Belleview High School came to the farm.

BRUCE ACKERMAN/STAR-BANNER

The Belleview High School special-needs students get this opportunity at no charge because of community support, but it does require some work.

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"Part of our curriculum is to offer these kids vocational training," said special education teacher Vanessa Rasbury. "They learn that nothing in life is free. And so they have to work."

But they don't seem to mind.

Not long ago, student Randy Shaffer, 18, was riding his favorite horse, Barney, and saw a couple of volunteers building a fence at the farm. Shaffer decided he wanted to help. His instructor asked, "Don't you want to finish your riding lesson first?"

"No," he said. He wanted to go right then to help. And he did a great job, too, said Gray.

The students also pick up fallen limbs, maintain and clean horse stalls and groom the horses, all of which are valuable job skills that they can use. They also receive instruction and work at Walgreens, Winn-Dixie, Belleview Veterinary Hospital, Catos, Kmart and the Belleview High Cafeteria.

Rasbury's assistant, Rachel Holland, said she loves to watch the students excel.

"The horse farm gives them the opportunity to do just that. They look forward to coming here," she said.

Gray credits much of the farm's success to her volunteers.

Louis Giardina, who is retired from the Army and volunteers three days a week at the center building fences and grooming horses, said, "These kids are a bunch of sweethearts. It's a nice feeling to be out here. It puts meaning in our day."
