

NARHA Brings Hope to Kids Through Horses



Dillon Haynes is like a lot of teenagers. He's 17 years old and attends high school in Mesa, Arizona. He loves animals, especially horses. And Dillon says that when he's on horseback, he feels free.

Free of the braces on his legs, the glasses on his face. Free of the cerebral palsy that makes even simple acts like tying his shoes or putting on boots so tough.

It's a freedom that many of us take for granted. But not Diane and Ernie Purcelli. The veteran CMSA riders bring people like Dillon together with horses in a partnership that not only frees the spirit but also exercises the body. It changes lives—including those of the mounted shooters who participate in the program.

The History

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Back in the early '50s, some European researchers discovered that horse riding was a good physical therapy for patients with various physical problems. "When one rides a horse, the person's body is being moved very similarly to the way it moves when the person walks," says Barbara Yost, communications coordinator for the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA). "So being on a horse exercises the hips, the back, the digestive system, etc."

At the same time, therapists found that the contact with horses was beneficial to patients with emotional problems.

It was an idea that spread. It reached the U.S. in the 1960s, and in 1969, NARHA was started. The organization works with patients of all ages and relies on volunteers to conduct many of its programs (under the supervision of a licensed therapist). Back then it was known as therapeutic riding; the most famous patient was Jim Brady, Ronald Reagan's press secretary who suffered a severe head wound during a 1981 assassination attempt. Brady's horse riding treatment got world-wide attention.

Today, it's called equine assisted activities therapy (EAAT).

The Purcelli Participation

Diane and Ernie Purcelli found out about NARHA in 2002 when they were still living in Illinois. “We had an intern from a community college come stay with us for eight weeks, and that was something she wanted to do. We did an apprenticeship at a therapeutic riding—my husband, myself and the intern all signed up as volunteers. Ironically, the intern did not continue with the program. I continued on a limited basis because I was traveling so much; I was still doing barrel racing at the time. My husband continued volunteering as a substitute and ended up going there every week. So he got me more involved.”

In fact, Diane became certified as an instructor. She and Ernie carried their interest West when they moved to Montana. Ernie got involved with the Special Olympics NARHA program. Diane connected with Wahl Clippers and their horse, Nevada Joe (see accompanying article).

It was Ernie who came up with the idea of a mounted shooting connection. According to Diane, “He thought the kids could pop balloons off of Nevada Joe using dowel rods with points on the end. It would use the same hand-eye coordination.”

Working with NARHA and CMSA, the Purcellis put everything together.

Dare to Dream

It was at Westworld in 2005 when the special shoot debuted. By 2007, it had evolved into the Wahl Clipper Dare to Dream program (now held at Nationals, Worlds and Festival of the West). Diane says the whole thing is pretty basic, reflecting what happens in the typical CMSA event. “It’s a full blown program—national anthem, meet and greet. Riders partner with 15 NARHA students. Cowboys and cowgirls get their own horses out in the arena. Students from the local NARHA center come out and meet the shooters. The students watch and cheer on the shooters. Then each mounted shooter comes back and leads Nevada Joe through a smaller, condensed course and the students pop the balloons with the dowel rod. Then the combined team total determines who comes back for the Saturday Night Showcase.”

Prizes and trophies (donated by the Little family) are handed out at the end.

But make no mistake: the biggest prize isn’t something you can hold in your hand. It’s that feeling of accomplishment that each participant carries home. Lady’s 5 shooter Jessie Kuka says, “The kids have just the greatest time. They’re smiling. It’s the greatest thing to do.” For everyone involved.

The Riders React

Diane is the first to admit—she had no idea how CMSA riders would react to the idea.

She needn’t have worried. “I can just drop a phone call and ask somebody and everybody wants to share in it. It’s exceeded my expectations.”

And there’s a reason for that—the riders get something out of the experience. Take Men’s 6 Royce Anderson, who participated in one of the first events. He remembers, “They lifted the kids up and put them in that saddle and their whole attitude changed. They just wanted to touch the horse, or be part of the event. They didn’t seem to have any fear. I was very moved by it. And I know my mother, who was there, she had tears in her eyes. She said, ‘That’s the neatest

thing I've ever seen you do.' And I was like, 'Well, it's a pretty cool thing to be involved with.' It makes you realize how lucky you are, to be healthy."

Lady's 3 Destany Wilson agrees. At the 2007 Worlds, she got particularly close with a little girl who began calling her "cowgirl sister." They still stay in touch.

Jessie Kuka was at that first shoot at Westworld, and she's stayed involved ever since—even working as a judge at the Special Olympics in Arizona this year. Back in 2005, some of the kids started calling her Jackpot Jessie; it's a handle she still answers to, and carries with pride.

So it's not surprising that in the ultimate family sport, entire CMSA families are participating—the Littles, the Kukas, the Coxes. And they'll do whatever is needed—riding, leading the kids around, setting up, tearing down, you name it.

The Aftermath

Dillon Haynes teamed up with Men's 5 Jim Hanson at Westworld. He got to ride, to meet Nevada Joe, to hang out with real Cowboys and Cowgirls.

Dillon stays in contact with Jim, and with Diane and Ernie Purcelli. He'll skip school to go see Nevada Joe. He can't get enough of horses.

Carmen Haynes, Dillon's mother, says, "NARHA/CMSA has shown him and others they can put on those boots and they can ride a horse and accomplish their dreams."

And to this day, Dillon wears the CMSA belt buckle that Jim Hanson sent to him after his first competition.

For further information, check the websites www.narha.org or www.nevadajoe.net

Features

Nevada Joe: The Face of NARHA

By [Mark Boardman](#) · November 5, 2008



Diane Holmes-Purcelli and Her Mustang, Nevada Joe

It only makes sense that the face of NARHA is that of a horse. A very special horse.

Nevada Joe started life in the wild, part of a herd of Mustangs roaming northwest Nevada. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is charged with overseeing wild horses and burros in this country. And every so often, the BLM culls the herds, sending some of the animals for adoption.

That's what happened to Nevada Joe back in 2002. He was about six years old when the Wahl Clipper Corporation adopted him through the BLM Wild Horse Project, then sent him to their equestrian center in Illinois. Joe was acclimated to the domestic horse world—and then Diane Purcelli took over, training the horse to compete in barrels, team roping and more. And, of course, mounted shooting.

During that time, Diane and husband Ernie were getting involved in NARHA—and Nevada Joe's disposition seemed to be a natural fit for working with special needs youngsters (and adults). "He has an amazing way of getting people to trust him," says Diane Purcelli. "There's a real connection there."

It was a connection that impressed NARHA so much that they named Nevada Joe their Official Horse Ambassador in 2006. In 2007, the Purcellis (along with Wahl) came up with the Wahl Clipper Dare to Dream Shootouts, mixing mounted shooting along with therapeutic riding (or equine assisted activities therapy). Nevada Joe, of course, is the star of the show.

These days, Joe is based at the Purcelli's Shooting Star Ranch in Darby, Montana. He travels all over the country to provide that unique therapy. He also has his own website (www.nevadajoe.net); he even has his own blog. He gets fan mail (and answers it).

In person, Nevada Joe is not necessarily the largest steed—only about 14.2 hands, a stocky bay gelding that looks like a lot of other mustangs or cow ponies. But when he's with people—especially those with special needs—he becomes something else: a symbol of hope, healing and love.