

Therapy by horseback
Healing environment at Newfane stables
By JAIME CONE / Reformer Staff

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NEWFANE, VT -- Jenna Pratt, 8, of
Brattleboro, had never been on a horse
up until two months ago.

On Thursday, she was trotting with the help of
her riding instructor, Lorna Young, and a patient
pony named Ovation.

While some children might be apprehensive
about trotting, which for the horse is like a jog,
Jenna said it was her favorite part of the lesson.



Image: Jenna Pratt, 8, on her riding lesson at the Therapeutic Riding Center at Winchester Stables in Brookline.
(Zachary P. Stephens/Reformer)

"You get to post a lot," she said, referring to the rider's up-and-down movement in rhythm with the horse's
strides. So far, she's only had five lessons, but she knows she wants to continue horseback riding well into the
future.

Jenna suffers from a skin condition called epidermolitic hyperkeratosis, which makes it difficult for her to
participate in physical activities with other children.

The new Southern Vermont Therapeutic Riding Center at Winchester Stables in Newfane has made it possible
for children like Jenna to learn riding skills and horsemanship.

The program specializes in using horseback riding to help improve strength and balance for those with physical
challenges.

For others, it can help improve cognitive skills or emotional and mental health.

"This has given Jenna a huge boost in confidence and self-esteem," said Julie Pratt, Jenna's mother.

She explained that Jenna's skin tears very easily, making sports difficult. It's likely that Jenna will be bumped
into unexpectedly, which she sometimes finds frightening, Julie said.

Jenna is also unable to sweat, causing her to overheat easily.

"There's not too much she can do without it bothering her skin," Julie said. "She loves other sports; it's just hard
for her to do."

"There have been times when she wanted to participate in sports, but her anxiety always got in the way," added
her father, Chris Pratt.

The therapeutic riding program gives Jenna the opportunity to participate in a physical activity where she feels
like she is in control.

"She doesn't have to worry about trying to predict what the other kids might do," Julie said.

On the horse, her anxiety seems to melt away, said Jenna's family.

"To see her go off on a lesson was amazing," said Julie. "Right away, she just went and never looked back. It was the first thing she ever joined where she wasn't afraid to leave us."

The confidence she has gained in just two months has already shown through in other areas of Jenna's life, the Pratts said.

"She's not as shy," said Julie. "It's like she's empowered now."

She said she bought her daughter an electric scooter years ago but that Jenna was always afraid to use it.

"After her first lesson she said, 'I think I'll ride my scooter,' and she just got on and took off," Jenna's mother said.

Volunteer Shari Gliedman-Baker said she first realized the powerful effect horseback riding can have on children when her own son, who has Asperger Syndrome, got on a horse for the first time.



Image: Jenna Pratt, 8, brushes Ovation after her riding lesson at the Therapeutic Riding Center at Winchester Stables in Brookline. (Zachary P. Stephens/Reformer)

"He calmed down and smiled," she said. "Horses have such an innate ability to heal people and to give pleasure and self-confidence."

The program is run by Lorna Young, a North American Riding for the Handicapped Association Certified Advanced Therapeutic Riding Instructor who has been giving therapeutic lessons for more than 30 years.

With help of volunteers, Young is currently teaching seven students in the therapeutic riding program, which was started by Nick Mercede, owner of Winchester Stables.

Mercede said he was inspired by his 12-year-old granddaughter, Jackie, who has Cerebral Palsy. He's actively involved with Jackie's therapy and care.

After doing some research he realized the positive effects therapeutic riding can have on people of all ages with a wide range of disabilities including Muscular Dystrophy, visual impairment, deafness, Down Syndrome,

Autism, Multiple Sclerosis, Spina Bifida, brain injuries, spinal cord injuries, amputations, learning disabilities and Attention Deficit Disorder.

Mercede, his wife, Anita, and his daughter, Laurie, attended the center's open house March 20. With the help of Young and a few volunteers, Jackie was able to ride a horse for the first time in her life.

"My granddaughter, we put her on a horse and she's laughing," Mercede said. "I can't express myself, how happy these kids are; every time I think about it I'm in tears."

Mercede began planning for the nonprofit center about two years ago with the help of his stable manager, Bevin Dugan.

Both Mercede and Young are looking forward to seeing the program grow. Young said she already has some students who are interested in participating in a horsemanship camp this summer.

The SVTRC is the only program of its kind in Windham County, Mercede said. He added that he hopes to eventually be able to accommodate students from as far away as Connecticut, where he currently resides.

The fact that he also owns a local hotel and restaurant will benefit the program in the future, he said.

"We'll tie it in with the motel, the Moose Bend Lodge, and we'll be opening (a local) restaurant soon, so we will have complete service for mothers and fathers," Mercede said.

For local families with children who can benefit from therapeutic riding, the new riding center is a welcome addition to the community.

"It's nice to know there's something close by," said Chad Lackey of Wilmington, who watched his 4-year-old son, Alex, have his first lesson Thursday afternoon. The hope is that riding will help Alex improve his coordination and balance.

As Lorna led lesson horse Jack, she interacted with Alex by handing him rubber animals she had placed on the fence posts of the ring. Two volunteers walked on either side of the horse to stabilize the child.

"I was curious how (Alex) would feel on a horse, but he seems to be comfortable," said Lackey. "He's really calm on the horse, which is a little surprising. I thought he would be more afraid of it."

"I can't wait to see the difference in him," he said.

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