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EPISODE NAME: The Benefits of Therapeutic Horseback Riding

Today on Across the Fence we're going horseback riding with a therapeutic intent. We will learn about accredited therapeutic riding programs in Vermont that are providing activities and therapies for the special needs community. Good afternoon and thanks for joining us, I am Judy Simpson. Thousands of Vermonters ride horses recreationally or perhaps competitively but for others horseback riding is therapy. To begin I'm joined by UVM Extension Equine Specialist Betsy Greene. Always nice to have you with us.

Betsy.: Great to be back.

Judy.: Let's start with the obvious question, what is therapeutic horsemanship?

Betsy.: Therapeutic horsemanship can involve any kind of therapy using horses so whether it's working for folks that have disabilities that are physical emotional mental you name it there are programs that work to help the people gain some benefit whether its strengthening or balance or just even daily working with horses and helping them cope and deal and improve upon any kind of benefits related to their disability.

Judy.: I understand there's a professional association that provides certification and accreditation to therapeutic riding facilities?

Betsy.: What was known as NAHRA or North American Handicap Riding Association was started back in 1969. They've actually recently changed their name to PATH International and that's Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International. The handicap word is quite dated that's not how we're referring to situations now so PATH is much better in covering a much broader offering of the services that they offer as an organization.

Judy.: So how many PATH-certified accredited facilities are there in Vermont?

Betsy.: We actually have two member organizations. One in Shrewsbury, Rainbow Riding Center we also have P's Farm Stables in Middlesex but we also have four
premier accredited centers starting from the north we have CHAMP adapted mounted activities a lot of people are familiar with CHAMP in South Hero. We have High Horses Therapeutic riding program in Norwich we have Rhythm of the Rein in Marshfield, and we also have Vermont Therapeutic Riding Center that's at Winchester Stables in Newfane.

Judy.: Excellent; with that introduction to the topic of therapeutic riding and to the accredited facilities around the state I want to welcome my guest who is on the front lines of therapeutic riding in Vermont. Dianne Lashoones is a program manager at the Rhythm of the Rein facility in Marshfield. She's a licensed physical therapist who is providing professional healthcare services in a number of private and public settings including sports therapy, geriatrics and special needs children and adults. Thank you so much for being with us, that's quite an introduction. We're going to get some specific details of your programs in Marshfield but first give us a little bit of an overview if you wouldn't mind of the Rhythm of the Rein facilities and what you and your staff do on a typical day?

Dianne.: Hi, it's great to be here. What we usually start our day with is we will review our schedule and lesson plans for the day. We will debrief our volunteers and let them know what the plans are going to be for our riders that are coming in. The horses are groomed and we check to make sure they are ready for their workday and we will check our equipment just to make sure it's ready to go. We then meet the riders as they come in, will check in with them and see if anything has happened during the week that's going to affect their session for the day and after the ride we will go over with the riders and caregivers how things went and at the end of the day we document the sessions in our records.

Judy.: About how many people do you see a day?

Dianne.: It will go anywhere from five to eight riders a day.

Judy.: You have participants who range in age from two to over 60 but most of them are students under the age of 21 who are under the special needs umbrella.

Dianne.: Right. A lot of our students are on IEP which are individualized education programs that are set up in their schools to help them maximize their benefit of their academic learning experience. A lot of the students might need accommodations or modifications to their school day or their school program in order to help them achieve. A lot of times it's hard to get all of these services optimized in a school setting and it's a great resource to be able to tap into some community partnerships to help them succeed in their school programs.

Judy.: Not to mention being able to get out of school in go to a farm. So for instance there some group activities as well?

Dianne.: Yes schools are really a social structure and it's a unique social environment to itself but taking the skills and generalizing them to community
activities as well can sometimes be a challenge to make that bridge between school and community. To help these students achieve life skills and social skills sometimes it’s as important for them to learn that, as it is the academic material that are being asked to learn school.

Judy.: Teamwork is important in that aspect.

Dianne.: Right. Again they need to learn to interact with peers and with other adults and again learning how to take the skills they’re learning in school to make them life skills as they’re moving into adulthood. It’s one of the biggest challenges. There are many constraints on a school’s ability to meet these needs. It’s challenging enough for teachers to plan a curriculum to address different learning skills. Some people are auditory learners some of them are visual some of them tactile learners and to be able to provide the special needs students with additional time they might need to learn the skills is kind of hard to get that to all fit into a school day. Again getting into community partnerships helps support those goals.

Judy.: Something you wanted to add Betsy?

Betsy.: Yes it seems like there are times when folks that are working with the horses have a better connection with the horses so it actually can act as a bridge I think to make those skills that they love and seek with the horses translate to their peers and school down the road.

Judy.: Tell me a little bit about what a lesson is like?

Dianne.: It could be very much getting part of the horse ready. Learning how the horse communicates because horses are nonverbal communicators. They use body language to communicate so many of our riders may be nonverbal for whatever reason of their diagnosis so they I think are a little bit more tuned in to body language communication. They may be part of the grooming of the horse the tacking up of the horse. Our sessions can work on specific riding skills or it may have nothing to do with the sport part of riding but working with the horse and hypotherapy as using movement as a facilitating part of their medical treatment.

Judy.: Talk a little bit about the hypotherapy because I think that's really interesting.

Dianne.: hypotherapy again is either physical therapy occupational therapy or speech therapy. Using the horse’s movement to help reach the goals that we're working on. For instance you have the youngster that has perhaps cerebral palsy and has very poor trunk control. They may not be able to sit in a classroom long enough to actually participate in the class. They may be so fatigued by the effort of holding their posture that they cannot get most of that lesson. Getting their therapy on a horse really works that core muscle stability. When they are on a moving horse every step they take their body is adjusting to those balance
challenges and in a typical session depending on your horse that rider might have 4000-9,000 balance challenges that they're working on in an hour. So they're getting a good workout.

Judy.: No kidding

Dianne.: It can really help improve their functional and physical ability to stay in that classroom participating in that class and not have to leave to take a rest because they're getting tired.

Judy.: So working some muscles that don't normally get worked in the usual daily setting.

Betsy.: Motor control muscles neurons everything. Just the movement of the horse is so natural.

Dianne.: And that a much more motivating therapy session for a child to be in then to be going to a physical therapy clinic and doing exercises to get stronger. If there on a course they're not thinking of as work it's an enjoyable activity.

Judy.: Tell me a little bit about the horses.

Dianne.: Horses are special. They really need to be right for this job. Not every horse can do it, it's incredibly taxing physically and mentally. They go through training there constantly being checked to make sure they're doing OK with it we want to make sure they are healthy happy and sound as well.

Judy.: So how many horses do you have your facility?

Dianne.: We have about seven horses in our program at this time.

Judy.: It might be surprising for people to know that even people who are wheelchair dependent can ride.

Dianne.: Yes adults and children as well a lot of times children are not able to access a great alternative adaptive PE program in a school if they can't participate in gym class. Horseback riding can be a physical exercise it can be a sport they can call their own it gives them something to be able to communicate with other students about. This is what I do, I go horseback riding. It also for a lot of people especially if they are wheelchair dependent it gives them the first opportunity to be eye level or above the eye level with any of their peers. That is huge it really is and I think everybody needs to spend a little time sitting in a wheelchair in a school or in a mall just to get a perspective of how significant this is because it changes your sense of self when you're at waist height with everybody else.
Judy.: Not to mention being up on a horse. Giving a horse instructions that is pretty empowering. I know you touched on this the therapeutic riding can also foster some peer interaction.

Dianne.: Yes again teamwork working with other students social exchanges. An IEP goal might be to have verbal social interaction with another student about a common interest and this can certainly be a place where we can support that. Again bridge the gap between what goes on in school and what goes on out the community.

Judy.: Talk a little bit about the self-esteem and confidence part of riding.

Dianne.: Again the thought that you were sitting on a 1000-pound animal and that you were communicating with it and getting some interaction control and positive response from an animal fosters empathy, fosters teamwork, organizational skills. It certainly fosters emotional control because you cannot have a temper tantrum or a melt down on a 1000-pound animal it's just not effective it doesn't work. Many caregivers note some positive changes in people's behavioral control when they're riding horses. There's a school in another state that actually is a school specifically for behaviorally-challenged people. They do have a barn and an equine program associated with that and a lot of these teachers say we want our students to have to ride before they come to class because they do better all day long.

Judy.: Do a lot of people ask if it is safe?

Dianne.: That is a concern and a lot of parents have said I was really nervous about putting my child on that big animal and I've had parents say schools are really concerned about liability of getting a child on horseback as part of their IEP. It's an incredibly safe activity. The horses are trained, volunteers are trained in rider and horse behavior and emergency procedures. Instructors are all certified in basic life support and CPR. We always pair the riders with as many volunteers as the need for it to be a safe center. All the centers have their own liability insurance so it's incredibly safe. You'll probably have more accidents out on the school playground then you do during therapeutic riding center.

Judy.: I would imagine if a child does need extra support there's someone there to hang onto the child as well. Betsy if someone wants to find out more about certified therapeutic horseback riding facilities what should they do?

Betsy.: Certainly they can check out the PATH International web site at www.path intl.org and they also can check out the local facilities in the state. There's a lot of information on that site that will take them back to the individual programs in their area as well.

Judy.: What do you have to say to parents who might be a little hesitant or maybe are not sure about how the whole horse therapy would fit in for their child?
Dianne.: I think the first thing is they should go to a center and just observe some sessions and talk to other parents who have their children riding there. I think that will really allay a lot of their fears. I think probably one of the most empowering feedbacks that I get from parents and caregivers are the joy that they see that having their child participate in something and succeed. When somebody succeeds in one venue it gives them the sense that I can try something else. That positive reinforcement is great for all of us we all need that and why would our special needs community members be any different.

Judy.: How about folks who might be a little hesitant to try this and say there's no way I could get on a horse.

Dianne.: There are ways certainly again come and watch at our site. Several sites have a mechanical lift that was one of the pictures earlier. For people who are not ambulatory we can get you on our horse. There are multiple methods of helping people on and off horses and it can be done safely. You can go to a program you talk to people you can watch the sessions you can try.

Betsy.: They have as many people as needed depending on the needs so it's not like you just put on and they say go have fun.

Dianne.: And people don't even have to get on a horse there's a lot to do with horses that do not involve sitting on their back. They might just come and groom the miniatures or visit the babies or just pet the horses.

Judy.: Diane how can people learn more about your certified facility and programs in Marshfield?

Dianne.: We have a website www.rhythmoftherein.org our phone number is (802) 426-3781 call or e-mail you can connect to us through the link on the web site and we'd be more than happy to have you visit and talk to you.

Judy.: And how about if anyone's interested in volunteering?

Dianne.: Contact is the same way as well. Volunteers are essential to any of our programs. All the programs rely so heavily on volunteers. Every volunteer that has come to our program has said we get more out of this than we give so volunteers have a wonderful time and they really enjoy it.

Judy.: I want to thank you both for joining me today. That's our program for today I will see you next time on Across the Fence.

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