

DREAMS COME TRUE AT A REMARKABLE THERAPEUTIC RIDING ASSOCIATION

By Dayne McTighe

Just east of Lethbridge sits a place that looks like any other equine stable facility- white fenced pens with shelters and happy horses warming their backs in the afternoon sun. What you can't tell from the road is just how remarkable this place is and how many dreams come true here. You will find the horses are a little more patient, some saddles may have handlebars or foam wedges, and the mounting block has a long ramp. Riding may not come as easy to the equestrians who ride here as it does for some, but what they take away from their experience is invaluable.

The Lethbridge Therapeutic Riding Association (the facility known as the Rainbow Riding Centre) was formed in 1976 when a few local volunteers offered riding instruction to individuals with disabilities. It is now run by a small group of employees, a great number of volunteers, and is governed by a volunteer Board of Directors. The facility consists of the Kinsmen Learning Centre (which houses the offices and boardroom), an indoor riding arena, and an 18 stall barn as well as paddocks and pastures. The LTRA is certified with the Canadian Therapeutic Riding Association (CanTRA).

Therapeutic riding is beneficial to people of all ages with physical as well as mental disabilities. Some of the disabilities range from paralysis, Cerebral Palsy, Epilepsy, Multiple Sclerosis, arthritis, Down's syndrome, Autism, Attention Deficit Disorder and people who have had emotional traumas. Physically the horses give a person movement they could not get from a wheelchair.



Riding strengthens muscles, teaches balance and coordination and one hour of riding is equivalent to the movement of one hour of walking.

Mentally it gives students something to focus on, teaches patience, and improves social interaction. For all students it gives them self-esteem and an activity they can call their very own.

The centre has clients ranging in age from 4 years to 81 years old and their longest active student has been riding 27 years. There are five 6 week class sessions that run from September to June and the riders have a one hour class each week.

Each session has approximately 55 riders, but lesson sizes are kept to a maximum of four riders at a time to allow for a lot of one on one time with the CanTRA certified riding instructor. Cost of a six week session is \$120. One of the aspects of the LTRA that sets it apart from other therapeutic riding facilities is that it is one of three facilities in Canada where riders can groom their own horses as well as tack and untack according to their abilities. The centre gives their riders the opportunity to learn to safely care for their horses in addition to the riding. This is beneficial for creating a bond, teaching responsibility, improving motor skills, and giving the riders a sense of accomplishment and independence.



There's a lot of one on one time with an instructor at this centre.

Volunteers are an integral part of the centre. Each session requires many volunteers with roles including horse walkers and side walkers. Depending on the rider's ability there can be two side walkers offering both physical and mental support. Many riders like the social aspect of the horse walkers and sidewalkers who provide a chance for good company and a visit. For each ride, the LTRA tries to pair a rider to the same horse and same volunteers so a bond can be formed.

Like many therapeutic riding centres the LTRA has found the Norwegian Fjord horse an asset to their program. They currently have fifteen therapy horses and three of those are Fjords. The Fjords are desired for their smaller stature, ability to carry heavier riders, mild temperaments and their steady easygoing attitudes. The LTRA Fjords are usually chosen as mounts for the students with the most physical disabilities because of their slower walk. As well, the sidewalkers do not have to reach as high to hold someone. The centre receives many horses of all breeds by donation; however, funds are set aside to purchase Fjords as they are more difficult to come by and hold their value.

Horses accepted into the program undergo a three week trial and if they pass, they then go through testing with the BOD. Testing includes their response to things

such as clapping, screaming and being ridden by inconsistent riders who aren't always balanced. The patience and maturity the horses require usually doesn't come until later in life, so most of the therapy horses are in their teens or older. Tax receipts are issued for donated horses.

The LTRA relies on grants, tax deductible donations, riding camps and clinics, facility rentals and private horse boarding, to assist with the costs. If a donator chooses, there is a wish list of items needed and also a program to sponsor a specific horse. Two fundraisers are held annually. One is the Joanne Perlich Ride for Dreams which is a trail ride through the river bottom with a dinner and dance to follow. The second is the Drive for Dreams Charity Golf Tournament.

On Sunday November 2, 2014, devastation hit the centre when a buildup of heavy, wet snow caused the roof of the riding arena to collapse. Fortunately no people or animals were inside at the time but damage was extensive and not repairable. At this time there is no riding taking place and a lot of disappointed riders. The LTRA looked into renting a nearby facility but because the riders need a completely dust free environment, special bathroom facilities and a few other unique items that was not possible. Clean up of the old arena started at the time of this article and although the timeline isn't clear, they are hoping to rebuild in the summer of 2015.

If you are interested in learning more about the Lethbridge Therapeutic Riding Association and the Rainbow Riding Centre please visit www.ltra.ca, call 403-328-2165 or write to: R.R. 8-24-6 Lethbridge, Alberta T1J 4P4. *Photos courtesy of Jaime Vedres Photography*

* See a short biography on page 11 of each of the Norwegian Fjord therapy horses used by the Lethbridge Therapeutic Riding Association and loved by their clients. 🐾

Helping Dreams Come True

MEET PRINCESS- she's a 17 year old brown dun mare, 13.2 hh



Princess is the shortest Fjord in the group at 13.2hh, which is beneficial for a lot of riders. She is great for nervous riders, as she is always relaxed and has a very calm demeanor. Dinnertime is Princess' favourite time of day; she is the first to know it's feeding time and the others are often alerted to the news because Princess is on the move. She was purchased from Ted Svensen with funds donated by the Lethbridge Shriners.

MEET HARLY- he's a 16 year old brown dun gelding, 14.1 hh



Harly was bred by Brian and Sharon Dahl in British Columbia and trained specifically with therapeutic riding in mind. Harly is very strong, so he's able to carry heavier riders. He has a very mellow temperament, and is a slow walker. Harly has the most personality of the Fjords at the centre and is known to be a bit cheeky at times. Harly was purchased with funds donated by the Coaldale Community Wellness Association Ltd.

MEET JOE- he's a 16 year old brown dun gelding, 14 hh

Joe also came from Brian and Sharon Dahl in British Columbia. He's been at the centre the longest of their current Fjords. Joe's dam was also a LTRA therapy horse. Driving is Joe's forte and he is delighted to pull his wheelchair accessible cart. One particular day when the equine chiropractor was making a visit, Joe was the only horse who didn't need an adjustment so he drove all of the students around that day. Joe also pulled his wheelchair cart in the Lethbridge Whoop Up Days Parade in August, 2014 and won the LTRA first place entry. Joe was purchased with funds donated by The Independent Order of Foresters.

