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Equine Therapy Offers Hope to Many

You merge onto the freeway, the skyscrapers of downtown Houston at your back. It's early Saturday, so the ribbon of road ahead of you for once has few cars. The drive goes smoothly. Turning off the freeway, you pass through the gates for SIRE – Houston's Therapeutic Equestrian Center after just a few more miles. From the drive and living in Houston, you know we're big and spread out. Even so, it's hard to believe nearly 900,000 people with disabilities live in the Houston area. SIRE, a Houston area nonprofit, has a mission to change those lives through accredited therapeutic horsemanship programs.

One recent visitor, stepping out of her car at SIRE, exclaimed, "It's like a spa, it's so peaceful!" SIRE's three locations – in Hockley, Spring and Richmond - each have a distinctive country feel though they are less than an hour's drive from the Heights.

At first glance, SIRE may look like any other stable. Look more closely, though, and you'll notice nearly every rider has a helper on foot guiding each horse. Most riders also have one or two more helpers, called sidewalkers, walking next to the horse alongside the rider. Waiting riders may be sitting in wheelchairs or leaning on walkers. Others might be in a parent's arms or sitting alone, humming and staring off into space.

Riders here, like those anywhere, are learning riding skills and are gaining strength and flexibility. But this is SIRE, where riders and their families benefit so much more. SIRE's horses, donors and volunteers build strength, empathy, and motivation, enabling more productive, fulfilling and independent lives. Riders can start as young as three, even

younger in some cases. You'll also find many middle-aged riders and even some well north of retirement age. The same can be said of SIRE's volunteers. Currently, SIRE and its 400 volunteers serve more than 300 riders a year, with 230 riding each week.

"Our horses are our therapists," says Lili Kellogg, SIRE's Executive Director, with a smile. More seriously, she relates research showing how similar the movement of the horse is to human walking. Heights resident Alicia Garcia experiences this first-hand, "I arrived at SIRE in a wheelchair and I now walk up to ride my horse." Alicia says riding at SIRE has given her more independence and confidence. She's been able to work at her custom embroidery business, too.

Heights resident George Daponte is one of the nearly 40 percent of SIRE's riders with an autism spectrum disorder. For those on the autism spectrum, therapeutic riding helps in building communication skills, better body awareness, and self-control. One rider's grandmother recently shared that her granddaughter is following directions better, is conversing more appropriately and with better eye contact. The family sees it and so does her school. Hugging her horse Tikki, one of SIRE's 27 horses, Skyler also has become more demonstrably gentle at home.

George has ridden at SIRE's Spring site for about 6 years. His dad, Tim, has lived in the Heights for 30 years and recently retired from HISD, where he taught physics at Reagan High School. Ginnie Muller, George's mother, explains that after George's diagnosis of severe autism and a sensory integration disorder at age 2, she and Tim supplemented George's traditional therapies with gymnastics at Discover Gym.

When George physically outgrew the little kid classes, horseback riding seemed to be a natural fit with his sensory integration therapy.

Ginnie says, "There are numerous places where George could have taken riding classes but we were careful to want an accredited therapeutic equestrian center like SIRE. George loves being outdoors, loves the horses and volunteers at



SIRE. The volunteers have learned that he needs to keep moving so he only stops momentarily during the class. And his instructors are continually developing new activities for him to do during class to keep him engaged. Ginnie appreciates that George finishes some lessons with trail rides, which he loves. "The volunteers and horses could not be more loving and wonderful. He feeds his horse pears or apples every week."

For many years, SIRE has also counted military veterans among their riders. Last year, SIRE rider and Air Force veteran, Derrick Perkins, was recognized as the PATH International Equine Services for Heroes Equestrian of the Year. He's now training to represent the U.S. in international competition. After his spinal cord injury, Derrick sought out activities to build strength and for recreation. Little did he know, he says, how much work riding takes and how rewarding it is. Therapeutic riding has provided an outlet for his rekindled competitive spirit. For other veterans and active duty personnel, SIRE can offer services at no charge to qualifying riders in collaboration with the Wounded Warrior Project.

There are 77 different diagnoses among SIRE's current riders. Attention deficit disorder, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, people with these disabilities all benefit from riding at SIRE. For a study on multiple sclerosis by the University





of Texas Medical Branch, SIRE currently is enrolling qualifying riders. (Contact Tara Patterson for study requirements, tpatter@utmb.edu.) In SIRE's most recent effectiveness survey, 98% of the responding riders reported experiencing physical improvement and 100% reported emotional benefits from therapeutic horsemanship.

The Heights connections continue with volunteers like Karla Goolsby. Karla and her husband, Bob, have lived in the Heights for five and a half years. When they lived in Kingwood with their big house and huge yard, they felt isolated from friends and from Houston. "We have loved living in the Heights," Karla says.

An animal lover, Karla began volunteering at BARC, the City of Houston animal shelter, and fostering and finding homes for dogs (beginning with two that were abandoned when neighbors moved away). When she became too busy to continue rescuing and fostering dogs, she looked around for another animal-related volunteer opportunity. "I grew up riding ranch horses and learned to ride English as an adult. I don't have a horse



nowadays, so it occurred to me that working with equines was a skill set that was going to waste. So, I set about looking for a way to volunteer with horses." A Facebook mention and a visit to SIRE's website (www.sire-htec.org) led to training to be a lesson volunteer at the Spring site in 2012.

Volunteers often witness real breakthroughs. Karla says, "Children who

are not able to speak at all will often learn to say "walk on" and "whoa." When they do it for the first time, it's really a thrill." Karla is not the first volunteer to have a parent say their son or daughter learned to walk or talk after riding at SIRE.

Many of SIRE's donors live in the Heights. Though SIRE riders pay tuition - with some paying less thanks to financial aid - no one has to pay the full cost, many thousands of dollars per rider each year. To raise the money needed to fully fund SIRE's programs, SIRE applies for grants, accepts individual donations, and holds several special events a year. Donations can range from support of a rider's "ride-a-thon" (like supporting a walker for the Avon Walk or bicyclist in the MS 150) to donations for the gala or other events.

Tonya Daily, a 24-year Heights resident, first heard about SIRE from an artist friend who volunteered there. More recently, she's been occasionally driving a neighbor with a brain injury to ride at SIRE. "I immediately realized what a special program SIRE is and how they help so many families with their loved ones' disabilities," says Tonya. "I have seen what a challenge it is for a rider to balance. It's clear what a great mental and physical exercise it is for the riders and it's inspiring to watch. Riders are excited to be there and it's an uplifting family-feeling atmosphere."

Tonya concretely expresses her appreciation in gifts to SIRE. She has donated art she painted depicting the peace of a horse at rest in a country pasture. Tonya explains, "It was an honor to help this exceptional group." Be looking for her painting to be featured at the "Suds, Scenes, and SIRE" dinner and a movie at the Vintage Alamo Drafthouse on August 23rd.

To grow the profession, SIRE also trains instructors. The Professional Association

of Therapeutic Horsemanship International certifies instructors and accredits centers, with SIRE being one of only two premier-accredited centers in the Houston area. There are 31 Master certified instructors, four of them teach clients and other professionals at SIRE. Woodland Heights resident, Sabrina Strawn, and another "inner-looper," P.J. Murray, earned their instructor certifications at SIRE.

Now SIRE Director of Development and Marketing, Sabrina can easily list many ways to get involved. "Learn more, spread the word to potential clients and friends, find out about field trips, volunteer, help us find horses, attend special events and on and on." Volunteering can mean committing to weekly lessons like Terry and Karla or volunteering on an event committee like Alicia. Sabrina praises the progress her husband has made in his balance and walking speed since riding at SIRE after a car accident. An unexpected benefit came when volunteering at SIRE helped her daughter land admission to college with a great scholarship. Ginnie Muller also notes after he saw George benefit from SIRE, George's brother Matthew did his Eagle Scout project there last year. So the opportunities to engage with SIRE are close at hand, even though you have to go past the loop and even past Beltway 8 to get there.

Ginnie sums it all up, "SIRE benefits the whole family. We enjoy the experience of being outdoors at a location that seems worlds away from the stresses and demands of everyday life. It is a joy to see how much happiness George and the other SIRE clients receive each week at SIRE. We envision George riding at SIRE for the rest of his life."

For more information, please see www.sire-htec.org or email sireoffice@sire-htec.org.

Upcoming events:

Suds, Scenes & SIRE featuring Hidalgo

August 23, 2014
6 pm - 10 pm
Alamo Drafthouse
114 Vintage Park Blvd, Houston, TX 77070

Swing for SIRE Annual Golf Tournament

November 17, 2014
8 a.m. to 2 p.m.
Willow Fork Country Club
21055 Westheimer Pkwy, Katy, TX 77450

Saddle Up for SIRE Walk, Run, and Ride-a-thon

October 18, 2014
7IL Ranch
5389 Mill Creek Rd, Cat Spring, TX 78933