

## “Therapy Ponies” Help Heal Kids, Adults

“There’s nothing like seeing a child blossom on a horse,” says Linda Watson, Davisburg, Mich., who turned a lifelong love of horses into a therapeutic riding program for children.

She and her husband did a lot of research before opening Pretty Pony Pastures five years ago on their 24-acre property.

At the center of the operation are Haflinger ponies, one of three breeds typically used for similar riding therapy programs. The breed has been in the U.S. for 50 years.

“These horses are a large pony size,” Linda explains. They range from 13.1 to 14.3 hands tall. The smaller size makes it easier for helpers to support riders.

“Plus the ponies are not as threatening to the kids. They look like Teddy bears,” Linda adds. Haflingers have gentle dispositions and can carry up to 200 pounds.

The Watsons purchased 12 ponies, and Linda spends a lot of time training them, mostly “despooking” them to not flinch at anything, from crutches to wheelchairs to inhalers. The ponies must also allow riders to mount from either side.

Linda works with up to four children at a time with several volunteers. Some children require someone to lead, plus sidewalkers on each side to support them. Her many volunteers love working with horses and children.

“Our goal is to teach each rider to become as skilled as possible,” Linda says. That helps balance, a big issue with many clients.

One 60-year-old rider had a stroke and came to Linda to improve her balance. After weekly riding sessions, she took first place in a lead line class at a local competition. After a year of riding, a 7-year-old client with cerebral palsy did something she thought she would never do – ride a bicycle.

Besides balance, Linda creates games to improve motor skills and sensory skills, particularly important for children with autism. Sometimes a client’s therapist comes along and suggests areas the child needs to work on.

Riders generally come once a week and spend an hour per session. They groom the horse – which is especially helpful for children with autism – and prepare it to ride. Sessions cost \$15 each.

About 80 percent of Linda’s riders are children. The other 20 percent are adults with balance or fear issues. In order to obtain reasonable insurance premiums through an equine insurance company, Linda also has classes for able-bodied people. She offers sessions for Scouts and beginning riders.

Anyone interested in starting a therapeutic riding business should volunteer first, Linda suggests, to understand all the challenges. It’s



**Linda Watson has turned a lifelong love of horses into a therapeutic riding program for children.**

also important to have community support to ensure there will be volunteers.

“Research it well,” she says. “Horses are a 24/7 job.”

Setup is not cheap either. The Watsons put up a building that includes a 100 by 60 ft. arena. They buy more than 2,000 bales of hay a year to feed their horses. Currently, good Haflinger ponies cost anywhere from \$1,000 to \$5,000.

The Watsons average about 25 riders a year and have a goal of 40 clients per year. Once

children with disabilities start riding, they usually don’t want to quit, Linda says.

For more information, she suggests contacting The North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA), [www.narha.org](http://www.narha.org).

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Pretty Pony Pastures, P.O. Box 86, Davisburg, Mich. 48350 (ph 248 634-7276; [linda@prettyponypastures.org](mailto:linda@prettyponypastures.org); [www.prettyponypastures.org](http://www.prettyponypastures.org)).

## “Horses For Heroes” Program Helps Wounded Veterans

By Dee Goerge, Contributing Editor

“We work primarily with amputees — particularly of the lower legs,” says Larry Pence, co-founder of a rehabilitation program for wounded soldiers that uses horses as therapy. “It helps soldiers work through the trauma they have sustained.”

Riding horse builds upper body strength, hand-eye coordination, balance and mobility. Equine therapy is also valuable to people with other disabilities, including brain trauma.

A recent addition to the program for more severely wounded vets is a \$20,000 custom-built carriage. The carriage has a foldable ramp for wheelchairs and rings/ratchets to hold them in place.

“It has many of the same benefits as riding. They are just riding on a flat surface as opposed to a horse,” Pence says, whose Washington, D.C.-based group is called Caisson Platoon Equine-Assisted Program, or CPEAP ([www.operationsilverspurs.org/CPEAP.html](http://www.operationsilverspurs.org/CPEAP.html)). Members of the famed Old Guard Caisson platoon, who drive flag-draped caissons to Arlington Cemetery, are assigned to work with wounded soldiers. The program has become an approved therapy option by the Veteran’s Administration and wounded vets come mainly from Walter Reed Medical Center.

Since CPEAP started in 2006, horse therapy programs for veterans have expanded to more than 50 sites across the U.S., working within the guidelines of the Horses for Heroes program run by the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA). NARHA is certified by the VA to provide therapy to wounded veterans. National

Guardmen or Reservists often volunteer as sidewalkers and assistants.

Most of the therapeutic equine centers depend on volunteers and financial donations to cover expenses.

Marge Gunnar is the founder of BraveHearts Therapeutic Riding & Educational Center in Illinois ([www.braveheartsridding.org](http://www.braveheartsridding.org)). “We work with four VA hospitals that bring veterans to us. Veterans don’t pay,” says Gunnar. BraveHearts has worked with several hundred veterans since 2007. The director of the center is a Vietnam veteran, and many of the committed volunteers are veterans, Gunnar notes.

BraveHearts instructors are NARHA certified. They offer both riding and carriage-driving sessions.

“We have a veteran who has been with us for quite some time. When he first came to us he hadn’t been out of his house for eight years. He was a Vietnam vet with PTSD. “He now rides in our drill team, and participates on our calf-penning team,” Gunnar says. “He is a vocal spokesman for equine therapy and has become a major recruiter for our program.”

Another veteran has traumatic brain injury and, before therapy, wouldn’t get out of a wheelchair. Now he walks without a cane.

Centers such as BraveHearts are always looking for willing volunteers as well as donations. To find centers in your area, contact NARHA.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, NARHA, P.O. Box 33150, Denver, Colo. 80233 (ph 800 369-7433; [www.narha.org/resources-education/resources/narha-horses-for-heroes](http://www.narha.org/resources-education/resources/narha-horses-for-heroes)).



**Horse riding helps severely wounded vets build upper body strength, balance and hand-eye coordination.**



**Thanks to generous donations, CPEAP recently acquired this driving carriage with a rear ramp for wheelchairs.**