

Special needs students find haven in horseback riding center

by [Megan Trotter](#)



Heather Wheeler, 12, hugs her second place trophy that she won at this year's riding show at Manna's Hanna Riding Center, while her horse is led by Paul Abell. This was Wheeler's first time to participate.

Ty Kernea | Herald-Citizen

When an little eight-year-old girl first came to Manna's Hanna Riding Center in Cookeville, she'd been struggling with spina bifida for her entire young life and had spent most of that time in a wheelchair. After she spent some time at the center learning the basics of horseback riding, her parents took her back to the doctor and found her hips and leg muscles had gotten stronger. And it's not just her body that has benefitted — her spirit has benefitted, too. "She had always had people look down on her," Bobbie Abell, riding center owner, said. "If you think about it, people in a wheelchair, you're looking down on them unless you stoop down to be at their level. Well, because she was up (on the horse); everybody was looking up at her. Her self confidence has just taken off."

There's another student who had trouble with bullying at school. She came in defeated and sullen, but after weeks of riding and caring for the horses, she is a different person. "You see light in her eyes. She's acting like a teenager now," Abell said.

Manna's Hanna Riding Center opened in 2011 for children with special physical, mental or emotional needs. Since then, through the generosity of the community, the facility has been able to get its side pasture fenced through Cloyd Fencing and Centaur Fencing, added new stalls to the barn, purchased more saddles, had a new hay barn built as Briley Scantland's Eagle Scout project, and gotten a mustang and a miniature pony to add to their herd of horses.

When a student comes out to the farm, staff interviews the family to see what they want to achieve and then set a plan into action to get them to where they want to be. Most start on the beginner level with one volunteer leading the horse and one on each side of the horse to keep the student steady. Once this is mastered, they move on to the next level: one horse leader and one side-walker. The next level is one horse leader riding on lead with a biteless bridle. The final level is the student riding off-lead with a leader walking or running beside them.

The students learn how to ride and play games during their lessons, and those who are able also work to take care of the horses once lessons are done. "It's not just coming out for pony rides," Abell said. "They're having fun riding and don't realize they're actually working those muscles and the eye-hand coordination. They're working on gross motor skills, fine motor skills, concentration and sequencing."

The program also touches the lives of the volunteers. "I have several volunteers who make it a point that that's 'their' child that they want to work with every year," Abell chuckled. "They're dedicated. It's really exciting to see that bond develop between the volunteers and the children. They're the children's biggest cheerleaders."

The center started with six students their first year, doubled that number in 2012, and this year have had 15. Staff expects next year's classes, which start in April, to have between 20-25 students. This year they had 10 students between ages of 6-10, two between the ages of 13-16, two between the ages of 22-25 and one who was over 25. Out of these, 86 percent came from Putnam County. The majority of the students had Down Syndrome, autism or some kind of developmental delay, while the remaining few had ADHD, emotional issues, spinal bifida, Tourettes or were visually impaired.

"The horses will choose the child, but sometimes we have to readjust," Abell said. "Like we have a little girl with spina bifida and she loves Corky and she rode Corky, but Black gives her more of the hip movement that we need for her."

Abell is thrilled with the progress the riding center has made so far and hopes to be able to continue to expand. In the future, she'd like an indoor riding center to help block out the distractions for the students, as well as being able to add the Horses for Heroes program, which helps veterans heal their emotional wounds.

"They have to catch their horse," Abell said. "Well, the horse knows their intention and they know their heart. If they're angry, the horse is going away. So they have to conquer that anger and frustration in order to get their horse."

The center is always looking for new volunteers. No experience with horses is necessary — just a love of children. Training will begin early next year. The center could also always use donations of funds for scholarship money for the students, as well as gift cards to places that sell feed and supplies for horses, and to places that sell office supplies. Those interested in learning more about Manna's Hanna Riding Center are welcome to call 931-349-8106 and schedule a visit.

"Being at Manna's Hanna is like stepping into a place of peace," Abell said. "It is a safe place, a haven where no one is judged. It is where a person can be him or herself. The center's goal — giving participants the skills to live life with more confidence, self-love and joy, regardless of their challenge or social, religious or economic status — is one that focuses on compassion and understanding, (and) helping each participant become the best horseback ride."