

Patient teachers: Riding lessons help students develop needed skills

By Megan Trotter



Carolyn Acuff, board member of Manna's Hana Riding Center, talks to Gypsy, one of the horses used in the therapy program that teaches horseback riding for children with special needs. Herald-Citizen Photo/Megan Trotter

COOKEVILLE -- A few months after Carolyn Acuff and her family were devastated by the loss of her 18-year-old son, she started having dreams about children riding horses. She had owned horses and her children had ridden them, so at first she thought she was only dreaming about the past. The same dream kept returning night after night.

"There's something that was really bothering me about it," she said. "I can't see the children's faces and the horses don't look right. Then I had the dream again, and this time the kids turned to face me -- they're not my children. I didn't tell anybody this dream for more than 10 years."

She didn't understand the dream until she met Bobbie Abell of Cookeville and her husband, Paul, who owned a pair of horses. While working at her church, Bobbie witnessed a boy with problems with his legs get his first riding lesson on a pony. The boy took his first steps shortly after that first lesson. The joy on the boy's face touched her heart and she decided she wanted to help children like him. She gathered her friends and they traveled to Franklin to see the riding center there that taught children with special needs.

"We saw the impact it was having on the children there and how much fun they were having," Abell said.

When Acuff and Abell met through mutual friends, it was a match made in heaven -- literally, they believe. Working together with other board members, they formed Manna's Hana Riding Center at 1285 Brotherton Drive in Cookeville. The name comes from the location of the center, Manna Acres, and "Hana," which stands for Helping Achieve Needed Agility. The center opened in April of this year for children ages four and up who have physical, mental or emotional issues.

Each child is interviewed with their parents to pinpoint areas that the lessons should focus on the most, such as communication or coordination. Parents' watches from a covered porch as the children meet the horses, learn how to groom them and get them ready to ride. When they advance to learning how to ride, each child has an instructor, a leader who focuses solely on the horse and one or two side-walkers who focus solely on

the child. They ride in an enclosed circular pen. As they progress in their skills, the children get to play games such as taking a cup off of a pole and putting it on a bucket and throwing a ball through a hula hoop while on horseback.

"It's exciting to hear them laugh and have a good time, and they don't realize they're actually exercising and learning balance," Abell said. "What's really exciting is when you see that light go off (in the child's head) and it's like, 'Ah! That's what I'm supposed to be doing!' It stimulates all kinds of muscle activity and teaches them so much about communication," Acuff added. "You're communicating with the reins. It opens up another way of communication to them. Even if they're not forcible in their voices, they're learning they can send commands with their body and with the reins."

The riding center is still in need of volunteers to work as side-walkers with the children. No experience with horses is necessary, as training will be given before volunteers start work. Scholarships for students are also needed for children of families who cannot pay the \$25 per class fee.

Abell says that in the future they hope to be able to partner with college students studying special education and be able to offer them college credit for working with the children. She also hopes to one day have an indoor riding arena to keep the children out of the elements and away from distractions such as insects. But for now, she and the board are content to work with what they have.

"I have a friend who said, 'Don't despise small beginnings. Work with what you've got,'" Abell said. "This is the most rewarding thing I've ever done in my life."

For more information about Manna's Hana Riding Center, call 931-349-8106 or email mannahana@gmail.com.