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Walking On with the Aid of a Horse

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“Walk-on,” Kate said, squeezing her heels into Charlie’s sides and clucking her tongue like the plod of a horse hoof. Charlie, a chestnut Haflinger, stepped lightly over a 2-inch diameter ground pole lying on the arena floor. Outside, it was one of those gray November days with skin-stinging sleet, searing winds bustling over the lake from Canada, and torrents of rain leaving shoe-soaking puddles outside every door. It was the kind of day Erie, Pennsylvania is known for. But to Kate, it was simply TREC day.

Despite the overcoat-penetrating cold, the Therapeutic Riding Equestrian Center (TREC) was doing what it always does: providing riding lessons to children and adults with mental, emotional, or physical challenges. In the middle of the arena, layered with a borrowed red hat and gloves with holes in the fingers, the instructor, Karen Mead, called out for the class of five riders to repeat the ground pole section by changing direction. Five riders on five horses, each accompanied on the ground by a leader and two side-walkers, followed the instructions.

Holding the reins in her left hand, Kate guided Charlie through a 180-degree, right-hand turn by touching the left rein to the left side of his Charlie’s neck. Resembling a pony-sized version of a Clydesdale, Charlie was the perfect companion for riders like Kate. Sturdy and muscular with a steady, smooth gait, Charlie was attentive, eager to please, and patient. Possibly most important of all, he had been trained to neck-rein: a Western riding technique not all horses understand. Simply touching one rein to one side of Charlie’s neck tells him to turn in the other direction. And on this day in November, Kate and Charlie traversed poles and cones, other horses and humans, through an obstacle course in an arena – nearly 22 years after Kate’s accident.

Two days before Christmas in 1993, Janet Csir, Kate's mother, kissed her six-year-old daughter goodbye before leaving for her job as a surgical scrub nurse. Janet's sister, who had come home for the holiday, had arranged to take Kate to the Millcreek Mall for the afternoon.

"I hadn't seen my sister in a long time," Janet said via phone. "I was excited to see her. We were all excited."

Kate and her aunt spent the afternoon as any aunt-niece combination might, bouncing between stores, tumbling in and out of a van. Around 5:30 p.m., on the way home from shopping, an uninsured drunk driver struck the van from behind and pushed it into oncoming traffic. Kate, who had been riding in the back seat, flew head-first into the seat in front of hers. The seat she had been so happy to occupy just a moment before unhinged from its track and pinned Kate between the two seats.

At six years old, Kate suffered a subdural hematoma. Tiny veins that bridge the virtual space between the dura matter covering the brain and the brain itself had ruptured. Blood trickled into the space, pressing on her brain tissue as she lay waiting for an ambulance.

"Kate's survival is the kind of miracle you hear people talk about," Janet said. "For months, we didn't know if she would make it. For months, our lives were only about hospitals and waiting. My husband and I married late. Kate was all we had."

Janet paused for a moment and then added, "People think the accident is the worst part, but it's not. The recovery is the worst part. There's just so much waiting."

TREC Begins

In 1980, more than a decade before Kate's accident, a different, much less severe accident also forever changed the life of Kimberly Danylko.

"The only thing I ever wanted to do when I grew up was be around horses," Danylko said over the phone early in November, 2015, when yellow leaves still clung to lush branches on her farm in Waterford, Pennsylvania. "Horses were my life. When I tore the ACL (anterior cruciate ligament) in my knee, I thought my life was over. I laid on my back for months with my leg in the air and a cast from toe to hip. Now, they want you walking the day after surgery, but back then, they casted you and strapped you up and left you hanging."

She paused before continuing, "I just remember thinking: This is it, you know? This is the worst possible thing that could happen to me. I later realized it was one of the best things that ever happened to me."

One day, frustrated and depressed about her long recovery, Danylko happened upon an article in *Parade* magazine about therapeutic riding and the benefits horses can provide to individuals with mental and physical challenges. Within the article was a photograph of a smiling girl who could not walk unassisted. But she could ride a horse.

"That's all it took," Danylko said. "Just that one article on that one day and I forgot about myself. I was instantly excited about the possibility of using horses for therapy. The next day, I called my friend, Carolyn Belczyk, the 4H county agent, and we started the process that later became TREC."

By 1982, TREC received full accreditation as a riding program for the handicapped through the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA), now called the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship (PATH) International. Danylko became the first certified TREC instructor and, with the help of other volunteers and horse people throughout the area, obtained donations of part-time facilities, horses, and tack. Twenty-one riders enrolled in the first full year.

While PATH provides membership to more than 850 therapeutic equine centers today, the organization had only existed for about a decade before Danylko decided to take on the challenge of growing a grassroots foundation. At that time, there was neither Internet nor social media to facilitate networking and research.

“We did it all through phone calls and letters,” Danylko said. “The response was unbelievable. So many people jumped in and helped with this unheard-of program. My grandfather’s company built wheelchair ramps, somebody donated helmets – I don’t even know where the helmets came from – and that was it. We somehow got it going from nothing.”

Kate’s Recovery

Because of the car accident, Kate suffered what is referred to as a TBI, or Traumatic Brain Injury. Kate, now 27 years old, has limited use of the right side of her body due to increased muscle tone causing such stiffness that she barely is able to move her right arm or leg. Kate’s brain injury also affects her speech, short-term memory, cognitive function, and balance. She requires assistance to walk and to perform many activities of daily living.

“I always tell people there are ups and downs when dealing with this kind of thing,” Kate’s mother, Janet, continued by phone, referring to Kate’s recovery. “The road is not a straight one. You continue down it, you continue searching for therapies that will work because it is worth it to see someone you love live the best quality of life possible.”

“Over the years, we tried many different therapies,” Janet added. “Kate often endured pain as part of her therapy. I was frustrated. She was frustrated. Sometimes I didn’t know what else to do for her. There was progress followed by setbacks. She had to learn how to function again.”

Janet’s determination to improve her daughter’s quality of life eventually led to a cocktail support system that now includes chiropractic release via cranial manipulation, Japanese acupuncture with fine needles, psychiatric therapy, visits to a chronic healer, and since 2005, riding lessons at TREC.

Therapeutic Riding Grows

By the early 1990s, around the time of Kate’s accident, TREC had settled into a single facility now called Tailwinds on Platz Road in Fairview, just south of Erie. Volunteerism, donations, and class attendance increased as people heard about TREC.

Sue Moczulski, whose son has autism, started volunteering more than 20 years ago when she brought her son to TREC for lessons. Moczulski said the biggest change she has noticed is the diversity of riders.

“I see older riders and more riders with physical disabilities now than I did 20 years ago. This is thanks to donations of bigger, stronger horses and the lift that someone built and donated four or five years ago. At one time, we had to lift a rider from the ramp onto the horse ourselves. Now, we have the mechanical lift,” Moczulski said.

According to TREC’s annual reports, statistics show that the average age increased from 14.8 in 2003 to 21 in 2014. The range of disorders or disabilities experienced by riders also has increased over the years.

In 2009, TREC’s busiest year on record, 285 riders took part in classes. Riders experienced disorders or disabilities such as autism, depression, cerebral palsy, and Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD), among others. That year, TREC received help from 535 volunteers for a total of 10,468 volunteer hours.

"The classes end in November for the winter, but the horses stay," said Betty Rositer, the new executive director, from inside the TREC office. "We provide food, board, and medical expenses for the horses until classes start up again in March. Classes take a break, but the organization never does."

Although the riders pay a fee for classes, most funding comes from private donations.

"Last year, we were very fortunate also to receive corporate sponsorship from Pizza Hut and Erie Insurance," Betty said. "Meeting our budget goal enables us to expand. We've been working on new programming for 2016, including classes for veterans and at-risk youth."

It All Comes Together

When Karen Mead, now a physical therapist assistant and PATH certified TREC instructor, moved back to Erie in 1990, she started coming to TREC to be near the horses.

"I didn't have the money to be around horses any other way, so I came out to TREC to be with them for free. It was the closeness of the volunteers that kept me coming back, making me feel like family. I just wanted to learn about the horses and be near them," Mead, who had just finished instructing Kate's class, said from the TREC office with Danylko and Rositer.

Even once she became an instructor, Mead insisted she taught classes because of the horses.

"Then one day it dawned on me. I wake up, take care of myself, go to work, do my thing, go to bed. These families get up and deal with so much more than I will ever think about dealing with in my whole wide world. Ever. And they show up here and they don't say, 'Oh, I'm late because my kid did this or my kid did that,' you know, like I do. These families, they just show up. And they're happy. Their kids are happy. And they just climbed a mountain to be here." Mead laughed. "And that was when I realized I was here for the riders."

Rositer experienced a similar awakening one day while watching riders mount their horses before class.

"I taught special education for about 10 years," Rositer said, when describing why she chose to work at TREC in her retirement. "So I knew a little about the program and believed in the ways the horses help the riders. Then one day I saw a man, a 34-year-old veteran, who worked so hard to get on the horse. He's in a wheelchair and he has to let volunteers lift him up onto the horse and after he worked so hard to get up there, his whole aspect just changed. And I just thought that was so amazing how much courage that must take to get on the horse."

Mead nodded and added, "Now I have long-term riders like Kate in class, and I see how much her balance has improved, how much more confident she is to ride the horses – she even projects her voice commands better – and I know this is all worth it. All the time we put into coming out here and being here is all worth it."

According to a literature review published in *Health Psychology* in 2013 on the effectiveness of equine therapy, two things are definite: 1) The sample base for scientific studies on the subject is thin and lacking, and 2) The few studies conducted thus far show results substantiating Mead's claims that horseback riding can improve balance, confidence, and communication skills. To date, nearly the entire equine therapy system has been based and built on observed improvements in class participants. Mead is not the only one to witness skill enhancement in riders like Kate.

Outside the arena in the TREC facility, Kate's father, Floyd Csir, a physician in town and a quiet man with a neatly trimmed beard, stood on the wheelchair ramp behind Kate after class. He nodded his head as Kate spoke about feeling free on a horse.

“Coming to TREC seemed to help all of Kate’s other therapies come together for her,” Floyd said. “Everything just seemed to get a little bit better after she started riding.”

“Riding has helped her physically, with her strength, because she uses muscles on the horse she doesn’t usually use. Her balance is better, her confidence is better. She is just like many other riders: TREC is the highlight of her week.”

“Riding has helped physically, with her strength, because she uses muscles on the horse she doesn’t usually use,” Janet continued. “Her balance is better, her confidence is better. She is just like many other riders: TREC is the highlight of her week.”

“When I get up in the morning and see it is TREC day on the calendar, I know I can relax,” Kate said. “I suffer from tightness in my muscles from my brain injury from my car accident,” Kate continued after her mother prompted her to explain the relaxation. “When I am on the horse, I relax the muscles I don’t use and work on the muscles I need to ride. And I relax my brain. I just ride.”

Janet said it took a number of years to put together the plan that works best for Kate. “It took a lot of work, but we are in a pretty good place now.”

As Janet helped Kate to rise from her chair, Kate said, “I do this because I am a hard worker.” With her mother’s assistance for balance, Kate took a couple steps toward the open barn door, then turned her head and added, “And I’m not a quitter. Nobody should ever quit.”

For more information about TREC or to volunteer, contact executive director Betty Rositer at 474.5276 or bdrositer@treceerie.org. To donate online or to view TREC’s “ways to give,” visit treceerie.org/donors0.aspx. Snail mail donations should be sent to TREC, 8342 Platz Road, Fairview, PA, 16415.



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