

Article published August 16, 2004, Erie Times-News

Horsing around can be good therapy

By DON JORDAN

don .jordan@timesnews. com

President Bush has called on all Americans to volunteer in their communities. Giving time, a weekly series, takes a look at what people in our region are doing.

In a cool, dimly lit arena, Dauren Stauffer rides a horse named Cisco through orange cones set up in patterns around him.

The horse's brown and white frame ripples and bends as Stauffer moves from a walk to a trot. It's hooves kick up heaps of dirt, as the 21-year-old Stauffer smiles under dark sunglasses.

Stauffer is blind, but he has learned to trust his favorite horse and the volunteer trainers that surround him as he rides.

"I like getting out in the fresh air and being around the horses," Stauffer said. "But the horses like it better outside."

Stauffer is a participant in Therapeutic Riding of Erie County, or TREC, a volunteer group that uses horseback riding as therapy for those with physical, mental and emotional disabilities.

The group serves 85 riders each year, teaching them how to control the reins and sit up in the stirrups.

Organization president Beth Racine said the program is a great opportunity for people with disabilities to gain confidence and interact with others.

TREC is a member of the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association, which certifies the organization's instructors.

Racine, 51, has worked with TREC for 20 years, contributing a night or two of instruction each week at The Willows horse farm in Fairview. The farm donates the space and takes care of the group's horses.

"I'm a city girl, but I love animals," Racine said. "It's a win-win situation for everybody."

But Racine said it could be better.

The group doesn't have the resources to give advanced classes or conduct the program in the winter. There is a long waiting list for participants to get into TREC.

Her dream would be to build a full-time facility with an office, classroom and therapy rooms, where TREC could serve hundreds of clients, she said.

TREC volunteers have already applied for grants to get the development started, but Racine said more volunteers with knowledge in these areas are needed.

"We're limited to a couple of days a week here," she said. "The need in Erie is so great."

Newly certified instructor Steve Farr drives each week from his home in Jefferson, Ohio, to try and meet that need.

The high school Spanish teacher grew up on a farm where he was surrounded by horses, so the move to get certified came more naturally, Farr said.

"I'd seen some articles on therapeutic riding and I thought it was pretty interesting," he said.

But the training and the long drive each week are no match for the smiling faces he sees. "It's nice to see these kids excited about coming every week," he said. "They really get a lot out of it."