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## Riding program wants own home

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It took a horse named Buzz to make Cassie Kitza speak.

The first word came unexpectedly, about three years ago, when Kitza was 16. Diagnosed with cerebral palsy and autism since early childhood, she had just begun taking riding lessons at Therapeutic Riding of Erie County seven months before. She couldn't or wouldn't speak, but Kitza's face lit up every time she got the chance to ride her favorite horse, Buzz.

On a November night in 2001, just after the horse riding lessons finished for the year, Patty Kitza was sitting in her living room when she thought she heard someone say, "Mom."

"I turned my television down and I heard it again," Patty Kitza said. "I walked into Cassie's bedroom and she was sitting on her bed, smiling. I said 'Did you call Mommy?' and she nodded yes. I must have cried for hours, I was so thrilled."

Patty Kitza attributes her daughter's progress to TREC, part of a growing number of organizations nationwide that use therapeutic horse riding to improve muscle tone, balance, posture, coordination, motor development and emotional well-being in children and adults with a range of disabilities.



Patrick Callahan hugs horse Archie after a riding session as part of Therapeutic Riding of Erie County. (RICH FORSGREN/Erie Times-News)



TREC rider Miguel Cruz rides tall in the saddle on horse Zima. TREC would like to build a state-of-the-art riding facility for disabled riders. (RICH FORSGREN/Erie Times-News)

After almost 25 years of sharing space and riding time at Willows Equestrian Center at 8352 Platz Road in Fairview Township, TREC wants to reach more people like Cassie Kitza by building a home of its own — a \$6 million therapeutic riding school its board of directors hope one day will be as internationally renowned as the Barber National Institute.

TREC's board of directors has begun strategic planning, a process that includes looking for 60 acres on which to build the school, and forming a fund-raising committee to lead a capital campaign.

"Now we're not going to be some small, volunteer organization," said Beth Racine, TREC board president. "Now people are going to start to take us seriously."

The new school would be modeled after nationally accredited Fieldstone Farm Therapeutic Riding Center in Chagrin Falls, Ohio. The state-of-the-art school would be fully accessible, providing electronic lifts to raise wheelchair-bound riders onto horses, accessible stables for riders to groom their horses and heated arenas for year-round operation.

The school would include classrooms for physical and art therapy, outdoor riding trails, indoor and outdoor arenas and cart-driving lessons for students who don't have the balance to sit atop a horse. TREC board member David Sawtelle said that eventually, the school could also provide employment opportunities for disabled riders as well.

The all-volunteer organization now operates two days a week out of Willows, cramming in short 30-minute classes in between that stable's scheduled lessons. Cassie Kitza was on TREC's waiting list for 10 years, since age 6, before a space opened up for her to ride.

Until now, TREC has spent little money on advertisement and publicity because it didn't have the capacity to handle any more riders. But Racine believes that with an expanded school, TREC could easily triple the 85 students it serves each year. Once the school is built, TREC would like to enter into partnerships with the Barber Institute and Erie Shriners Hospital for Children.

"It breaks my heart because right now we have to turn people away," Racine said. "A lot of people have asked about hour-long classes and some of the riders are ready for advanced classes, but we don't have the time or space to offer them. We're actually holding people back."

An expanded school is good news for Mary Renz Anderson. Anderson's 19-year-old daughter, Sarah Anderson, has been riding since she was 8 years old and is ready for more advanced training that an expanded school could provide.

"TREC has really made her come out of her shell," Mary Renz Anderson said. "I've seen more of an emotional change than anything else. She's so much more social and outgoing. It makes me feel great to see her up there enjoying herself, and now she's really ready for more."

Her daughter agrees.

"I want to jump," Sarah Anderson said, an eager smile spreading across her face.

For her part, Patty Kitza said, she'll do anything to help TREC expand and touch more lives.

"When Cassie spoke, it just stopped my heart," Patty Kitza said. "I know what this organization can do."

@ For more information about TREC, visit [www.trec.s5.com](http://www.trec.s5.com) or call 824-5276.

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TREC riders and volunteers saddle up at Willow Equestrian Center. (RICH FORSGREN/Erie Times-News)

### **Horses hand disabled some gittyup**

At these stables, horses are doctors, and arenas are rehab rooms.

You wouldn't know it from the giddy smiles on their faces, but the 85 riders — most of them children, all of them with physical, developmental or mental disabilities — sitting atop the horses are patients of sorts.

Their therapy? Therapeutic riding, a form of rehabilitation that uses horse riding to improve muscle tone, balance, posture, coordination, motor development and emotional well-being in children and adults with a range of disabilities.

Therapeutic riding centers are growing in popularity, with more than 700 therapeutic riding centers in the United States and Canada. One of the 700 is Therapeutic Riding of Erie County.

"It's exploding nationwide as more and more people realize that this kind of therapy works," said Beth Racine, president of TREC, a nonprofit staffed entirely by volunteers that operates from Willows Equestrian Center in Fairview Township.

"You put these kids on a horse and the change is amazing," she said.

Therapeutic riding has proved to be effective therapy for people with cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, Down syndrome, spina bifida, autism, blindness, deafness, and emotional and mental disabilities.

But how exactly does it work? It has a lot to do with the movement of the horse, plus exercise and an emotional connection with the animal, experts say.

"A horse provides three-dimensional movement," said Michael Kaufmann, director of educational programs for North American Riding for the Handicapped Association Inc.

"When you're sitting on that horse, your body is immediately exposed to that motion, and as a result, your bones, skeleton and brain react to that motion, which is beneficial. A medical professional can use that motion to do physical or occupational therapy. ... It's not magic, it's all very mechanical."

Riding also helps with hand-eye coordination and balance and improves muscle tone.

The rehab goes beyond physical exercise, said K.C. Henry-Bergman, former executive director of Fieldstone Farm Therapeutic Riding Center Inc. in Chagrin Falls, Ohio.

Forming a bond with a horse can be just as emotionally therapeutic, Henry-Berman said.

"A person can get such an emotional boost from seeing the world from the top of a horse instead of from their wheelchair," she said. "It's a whole different perspective."

TREC is beginning strategic planning to build a \$6 million therapeutic riding school of its own.

For more information about the program or to become involved, visit [www.trec.s5.com](http://www.trec.s5.com) or call 824-5276.

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