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Taller in the saddle Therapeutic riding program takes reins at its new facility

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It's tough enough being the new kid in a new place.

But Claire Yandrick has more than just a change of address going against her.

In the year since her family moved from Indiana, Pa., to Summit Township, the developmentally delayed 9-year-old has struggled to make friends.

Children her age -- be it in school, at church, or around the neighborhood -- see Claire, see that she's different and stay away.

"I just want my daughter to have fun and to bond with other children," said her mother, Pam Yandrick. "Claire needs to get a boost of self-confidence." That boost is on its way.

Claire will be one of the first people in the Erie region to benefit from a major expansion by the Therapeutic Riding Equestrian Center, which provides horseback riding lessons to children and adults with mental, physical or emotional problems.

Beginning with its summer session, which starts July 5, TREC will operate its 80-acre facility in Fairview full-time, tripling its number of classes while adding advanced classes and private lessons for riders.

The big leap also means TREC (formerly Therapeutic Riding of Erie County) can effectively wipe out its waiting list of more than 40 people -- many of whom have been put on hold by the nonprofit organization for nearly a decade.

"We're so excited to get started," said Pam Yandrick, whose daughter would've been put at the back of TREC's waiting list had the organization not beefed up its program. "I just know this is going to be so great for Claire."

TREC, which currently has about 180 clients, is hoping to raise its client list past 500 by June 2007, citing recent census totals that report 14 percent of Erie County's population (about 40,000 people) is handicapped.

Accommodating that kind of business commitment means the only facility of its kind in northwestern Pennsylvania will become a lot more expensive to run.

Before it officially went full time on Thursday, TREC was cramming seven hours of classes into two days a week at the Willows Equestrian Center. Now it jumps to 25

hours a week. What also jumps is the cost of operating the place, from \$2,500 a month to about \$11,000.

To offset those costs, TREC is raising its rates. A 10-week session that used to cost \$40 now costs \$120.

"We sent out the new rates to our current client list and haven't received any complaints," said Tina Mengine, TREC spokeswoman and special-projects coordinator with Hamot Medical Center, one of several community organizations partnering with the center.

"Clients know that with our old rates, they were getting a steal for so long," said Mengine, adding that TREC's new rates are still below the national average for similar programs. "Plus, many people have this paid for through some type of insurance or school program, so it's not all out-of-pocket."

Adding to the costs will be a renovation of the Willows property, which TREC has now taken over after being a tenant there for years. Construction projects will include a handicapped ramp and restrooms between the two indoor riding arenas.

"It will be a very financially tight operation for us to make ends meet at first," Mengine said.

She said support has already come in the form of people in the community donating horses, hay, maintenance services, and discounted veterinarian care. TREC also will take in a small number of borders to offset expenses, leasing out about 20 stalls.

"This is a very special program," said program director Kimberly Danylko, who helped co-found TREC in 1980. About 80 percent of its clientele are children. "It gives these kids an opportunity to experience something they never would otherwise," she added. "It gives them a sense of success and a feeling of accomplishment."

Therapeutic horse riding helps improve muscle tone, posture, coordination, motor development and emotional well-being in children and adults with a range of disabilities.

Erie native Ryan Paszkowski developed spinal meningitis when he was 11 months old. He recovered, but excessive nerve damage left him deaf in his right ear.

By the time he was 5, Paszkowski had a hard time keeping his balance. Whenever he'd walk, he'd end up bumping into things, falling down and hurting himself.

His mother enrolled him in TREC -- a decision, she now says, that changed her son's life.

"As he rode on top of the horse, his body would mimic the rhythm of the horse, and through that Ryan got the feeling of coordinated walking," said Barb Paszkowski, whose son was in TREC for four years. "And like that, he could walk better. He stopped falling down."

Ryan Paszkowski, now 26, lives in Cincinnati and works as a mechanical engineer at a plastics plant.

"He's a totally different person today because of what he learned there," his mother

said. "We're very lucky and very grateful."

Alyssa Hume had been riding horses at TREC for more than 10 years before she stopped last fall.

The 18-year-old Millcreek teen with cerebral palsy took up a new sport -- ice skating -- but the time of those lessons conflicted with her riding lessons. When she later wanted to return to TREC, the organization had no choice but to put Hume on the waiting list -- a list that now no longer exists.

"She can't wait to get back in. She's so excited," said Alyssa's mother, Karen Hume. Her daughter will resume riding lessons in July.

"The program gave her such great confidence. It was so wonderful to watch," Karen Hume said. "Alyssa loves animals. Being on that horse, she felt like the horse liked her. She felt like the horse was listening to her."

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