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## Horse therapy gives kids the freedom to ride

By Katelyn Farago MCW This Week November 5, 2008

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Elizabeth Carlson of Long Valley quit her job in 2007 to be able to devote all of her attention to Freedom Horse Inc. -- a nonprofit all-volunteer organization offering equine-assisted activities to children with disabilities.

#### ADVERTISEMENT

Carlson, who founded the organization in 2006 on her property, which includes a stable, said Freedom Horse gave her the opportunity to combine two of her greatest loves: children and horses. She and her husband were unable to have their own children, she said, but Freedom Horse provided them with a way to take care of children facing some special challenges.

"We wanted to surround ourselves, and what better way to do it?" she said.

## Horse therapy

Freedom Horse, which currently serves approximately 20 children, offers both therapeutic riding instruction and hippotherapy. The hippotherapy is conducted by Sara Goodstone, a doctor of physical therapy, who utilizes the horse as a treatment tool for specific rehabilitation goals.

Goodstone will often take a patient on a trail ride, where activities have been set up to work on the patient's motor skills, balance and coordination. At one of the stops, the child is prompted to throw a basketball from atop the horse's back through a hoop situated on a tree.

Hippotherapy is utilized primarily for children with cerebral palsy, autism spectrum disorders and sensory integration disorders, Goodstone said. She said the goal with hippotherapy is to be able to transfer the patient over to therapeutic riding.

A certified advanced therapeutic riding instructor, Carlson teaches the children how to ride, and assists them in the hopes that they will ultimately become independent riders. However, therapeutic riding is not physical therapy.

With both hippotherapy and therapeutic riding, Carlson said the experience of riding the horse moves the rider's muscles in ways that they may not be able to do themselves.

"It mimics the movement, as if you were walking," she said.



warren westura / mcw this week

Faith Morelli, 5, of Long Valley has a big laugh at Freedom Horse Inc., an equine therapy facility in Long Valley founded by Elizabeth Carlson, right.

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Volunteer -- Freedom Horse needs volunteers to help with

Lorraine Morelli of Long Valley said her 5-year-old daughter, Faith, has benefited tremendously from coming to Freedom Horse twice each week.

Faith, who was born with trachea malacia, lost oxygen to her brain last May after having some trouble swallowing a piece of pizza. Faith went into cardiac arrest, Morelli said, and suffered seizures throughout the day. Doctors told the family that Faith would be severely brain damaged, but today Faith is walking, talking and catching up on her schoolwork with a teacher who comes to their house.

Morelli said she thinks Faith is 90 percent back to her old self, and attributes some of her recovery to the hippotherapy she has received at Freedom Horse.

"I've been through so many therapies with her -- the horse therapy is by far the best therapy she has ever had," she said. "It absolutely has changed her mental and physical status."

Faith is always happy and enthusiastic to come to Freedom Horse, and Morelli said she thinks that the excitement of riding a horse gives her extra motivation.

"It makes them want to improve and get better," she said. "It feels more natural for them. It doesn't feel like they're working, but they are."

Cindy Janacek of Mendham Township said she heard about Freedom Horse through KidTherapy of Chester, a pediatric-based private practice -- with whom Freedom Horse partners -- offering occupational, physical and speech therapy. Janacek started sending her 6-year-old daughter, Jennifer, to Freedom Horse this past summer for balance issues.

"I am just so pleased," she said. "Neurologically, I think it's just putting into action what comes easily to some people."

## Fundraising efforts

Freedom Horse recently invested in a new indoor ring, to be used during the winter months when snow covers the ground. Carlson said she raised about \$14,000 for the \$24,000 ring in the past year -- primarily from session costs, fundraisers and private donations. FarmTek then offered Freedom Horse a zero percent loan on the remaining \$10,000, so a 60-foot, portable round pen is on the way. Carlson said she hopes to raise the rest of the money within the next year.

Because Freedom Horse is an all-volunteer organization, the funds raised through session costs pay for the organization's insurance and have helped pay for the new indoor ring. Carlson does not even pay herself a salary.

Carlson's next project will be a scholarship fund that will be named for Faith Morelli. The proceeds will help the Morelli family and others pay for the costs of hippotherapy at Freedom Horse. Though some

grooming, tacking up the horses and training them. People who are interested in volunteering can pledge as little as an hour a week.

Donate -- Freedom Horse would appreciate donations of used horse equipment -- particularly a pony cart or harnesses. The organization also accepts monetary donations and will reserve the money to be used for a specific purpose if asked (i.e. horse care, hay, the indoor ring, etc.). The facility is currently looking for an all-around horse, 14.3 hands to 15.2 hands, which can walk, trot and canter. The horse must have a calm disposition.

Sponsor -- You can choose to sponsor one of the horses for a year.

For more information, contact Elizabeth Carlson of Freedom Horse at [mspycar@aol.com](mailto:mspycar@aol.com).

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insurance will contribute to the costs of hippotherapy, many others will not.

"When most people get physical therapy, the insurance companies will not ask if the physical therapist is using a ball or a mat," Carlson said. "So why do we have to say we're using a horse?"

For more information on Freedom Horse, send an e-mail to [mspycar@aol.com](mailto:mspycar@aol.com) or visit [www.freedomhorseinc.com](http://www.freedomhorseinc.com).

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