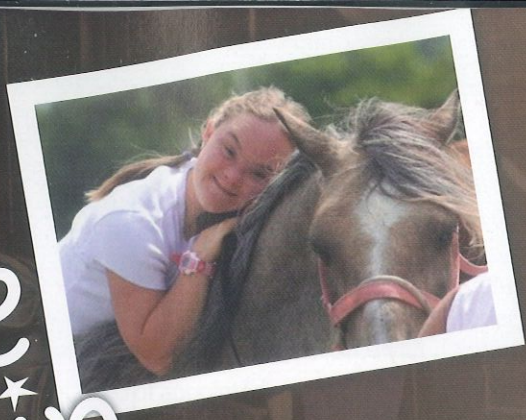


# Back in the Saddle Again



By Aimee Nicolia

*Thomas Fetterman always considered himself to be a cowboy at heart. But he never had a horse of his own. So it didn't take much for a small ad in a local paper looking for volunteers at a horseback-riding center to catch his eye. Coincidentally, he had been looking for an opportunity for his daughter Brean and him to do volunteer work together, so this certainly seemed like the perfect fit.*



Beth Racine, Executive Director of the Therapeutic Riding Equestrian Center (TREC) in Fairview, was happy to welcome Fetterman and his daughter to their team. Volunteers are utilized by TREC to help out with lessons that are given to riders, both children and adults with special needs, whether physical, emotional or mental. But you'll never hear Fetterman referring to the riders as having "special needs". Instead, he prefers the term "special abilities". Because, over his ten years with TREC, he says that he has learned something from every rider.

When they first started volunteering at TREC, Fetterman and daughter Brean quickly "learned the ropes". Some of the many duties that need to be done before the students even arrive include getting the necessary equipment out of the tack room, such as saddles, bridles and pads. Volunteers are also responsible for getting the horses ready for the arena, cleaning their buckets and getting them fresh water. During the lessons, helpers are needed to spot and lead the riders by walking in front of or alongside the horse.

A typical lesson at TREC may involve just one rider, or in some cases up to five riders, often coming from group homes. Their clients have included individuals with multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, blindness, deafness, cognitive challenges, and anger management.

TREC's director Beth Racine explains why horseback riding provides a therapeutic experience for special needs individuals. "It gives the rider a sense of freedom they wouldn't normally have," says Racine. "The individual can grow once they get atop a horse."



According to Racine, sometimes they take the riders on trail rides through paths into the surrounding wooded area. For their students who may be wheelchair bound this provides a unique and wonderful opportunity being able to go somewhere they might not otherwise have the opportunity to experience. "They can hear the sounds of the woods and see the animals and the leaves," says Racine. "Things they may not get to do normally."

Helping others to have such experiences was extremely rewarding to Fetterman. But, in March of 2009, his volunteering had to come to an abrupt stop, when he contracted a rare virus that caused his autoimmune system to attack his nerves. It started as a back pain that wouldn't go away and within weeks progressed to episodes of falling down. Fetterman was diagnosed with Guillain-Barre Syndrome (GBS), a disorder affecting the peripheral nervous system. It is a very painful condition that causes the muscles to atrophy. The progression of the disease can happen very quickly starting with numbness and weakness in the extremities. It can then lead to paralysis as it did in the case with Fetterman.

He spent the next five months in a wheel chair. "It was very frustrating," said Fetterman, "There is no known cure for GBS. There are only treatments for the symptoms and the first methods of treatment were not working."

Eventually his doctors tried a treatment involving the administration of intravenous immunoglobulins (IVIg), which was effective for Fetterman. Slowly he began to improve and





## The Real Stars

The Therapeutic Riding Equestrian Center (TREC) relies on the knowledge and skill of its instructors who are certified through PATH, Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship. They also count on the dedication of their volunteers. But as TREC Executive Director Beth Racine is quick to point out, the real stars of the show are the horses.

According to Racine, horseback riding creates such a unique and wonderful environment for therapy because of the very nature of the horses. "They are very intuitive animals," she explains. "They can feel the emotion of the person when they enter the arena. For example, if the person is angry or has had a bad day, a horse can pick up on it."

with the help of physical therapy he was soon able to walk again. Prior to the illness he had been an avid runner, so it was a huge milestone for him when he reached the point that he was able to run again. But the recovery has been a long and difficult process in which he has had to relearn many of the things we take for granted. He still experiences some residuals of the GBS, like numbness and tingling, which may never go away.

As Fetterman gradually regained some of his strength, the Therapeutic Riding Equestrian Center became an important aspect in his life. Despite the difficulties he was experiencing in his own life, it was still important to him to help other people. In addition, he wanted to get back to as many of the things he had done previously. "It was like my life was a jigsaw puzzle that I was trying to put back together," explains Fetterman. "One of the pieces of the puzzle was TREC."

At first he came back to TREC for very short lengths of time, because he would tire quickly. Gradually he was able to stay for longer periods of time and take on more responsibilities. In a sense, it was therapeutic for him to be helping the riders who were there for their own therapy. Having been in a wheelchair, gave him an appreciation of what it is like for their wheelchair bound clients – like Alivia, a young rider who comes to TREC once a week. But perhaps as important, knowing that he could make a difference in someone else's life has made him feel better.

She goes on to explain that the sheer size of a horse can be intimidating at first to a student. But in no time at all the gentleness of the animal simply melts the student's heart. It is not unusual for her to see a rider with anger management issues to come in for a therapy session and to soon become relaxed in the presence of the horse. "By the end of the session they are hugging the horse," says Racine.

The motion of the horse is calming to a rider, as is the warmth of the horse. TREC uses English riding saddles, which bring the rider closer to the horse than a Western style saddle would. So it helps to relax the rider. In addition, there are several volunteers alongside the horse to assure the student's safety.

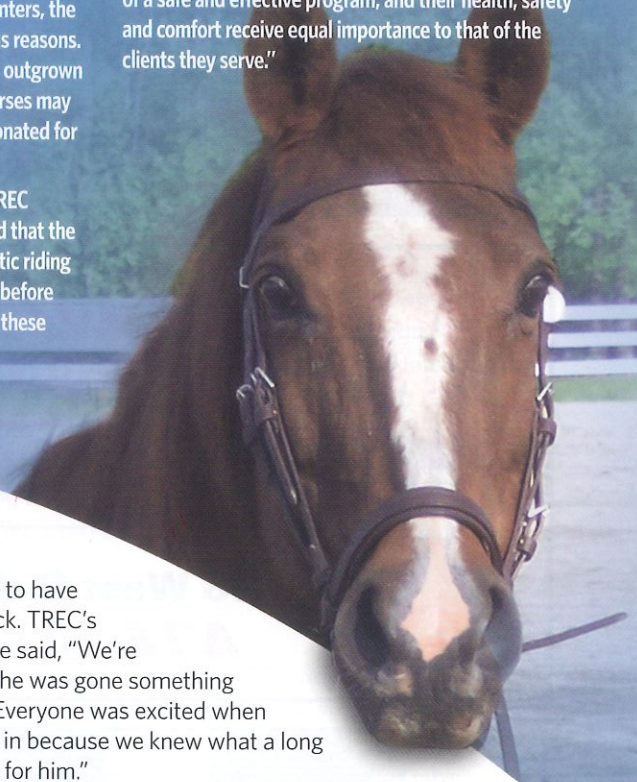
TREC currently has ten horses that are use for therapy purposes. As with most therapeutic riding centers, the horses are donated to the program for various reasons. In some cases the previous owners may have outgrown their horse either in size or interest. Some horses may be retired competitors. Still others may be donated for a tax credit.

Danielle Clark, who has been involved with TREC both as an instructor and volunteer, explained that the donated horses must first meet the therapeutic riding center's needs and pass a trial testing period before being accepted into the program. Because of these requirements, most are not accepted.

According to Clark, some of the physical attributes that are necessary for a therapy horse include being of sound mind and body, and having a size of 14 to 16 "hands", such that the horse can accommodate children and adult riders while not being so tall that human volunteer side-walkers would be uncomfortable. In addition, the better the body mechanics of the horse, the more useful he will be.

The temperament of the horse is of course crucial. A therapy horse must have a quiet disposition as well as a high tolerance for external stimuli such as loud noises and movements. As Clark explains, the sessions often include the use of props like beach balls and hula-hoops, so it is important that the horse is able to stay focused and calm despite these distractions.

"A good therapeutic riding horse is worth his weight in gold," says Clark. "They have a difficult job, often carrying asymmetrical or off-balanced riders as well as riders with unpredictable behavior. Carefully selected and well-trained horses are the mainstay of a safe and effective program, and their health, safety and comfort receive equal importance to that of the clients they serve."



The staff at TREC was equally happy to have Fetterman back. TREC's director Racine said, "We're family. When he was gone something was missing. Everyone was excited when he came back in because we knew what a long journey it was for him."

They look forward to the plate of brownies that he bakes every week and brings in to share with the staff. It is the simple things like the brownies that are so special now. "I don't take anything for granted anymore," he says. "It humbles you and changes what is really important to you. Now I see each day as a gift."

**If you would like more information about volunteering at TREC, please visit their website at [www.treceries.org](http://www.treceries.org).**