

# Celebrating Two Decades of Miracles in *Motion*

Now 20 years old and thriving, Miracles in Motion Therapeutic Equestrian Center still shares the tremendous joy of horses.

By Ruth Paarmann

Every week from the time the snow melts to the time the leaves fall, a beautiful connection happens between horses and persons with disabilities. At Miracles in Motion near Swisher, an average of 100 children, teens and adults per week are put in charge of riding, driving and working with horses.

"Horses are great for the mind and body," says Sue Bock, program director for Miracles in Motion. "They also help you physically by mimicking your walking gait. For those who are wheelchair bound, this is especially important. And for those with mental disabilities, horseback riding and driving are stimulating and powerful activities."

According to the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA), therapeutic horseback riding dates back several centuries; European equestrians helped organize it in the 1950s. But a local program where children with disabilities could ride horses originated from an interaction in the 1980s between Verne Upmier and Stephanie Gilbertson's daughter, Andy, who has a disability. When she was about six, Verne invited Andy to ride a pony at his stables.

"Verne thought every kid should be on a pony," says Stephanie. The informal rides led to regular rides, and then the Gilbertsons purchased their own pony. Pretty soon, people around the stable watched Andy riding and started thinking of how it might benefit even more children.

"The therapeutic riding was an idea whose time had come. People and horses came as they were needed," Stephanie says. "They say, 'When the student is ready, a teacher will appear.' And they did. It was fun!"



Stephanie explains that the first teacher was Sandy Greear, a horsewoman who grew up on a pony at Upmier Stables. "Sandy took a leap of faith to establish Miracles in Motion as a nonprofit organization in 1988. She organized the people and things and became Miracles' first instructor. She also convinced her employer, Quaker Oats, to provide a grant for startup."

As volunteers and about a dozen students joined Stephanie and Andy, more horses were needed.

"All of the horses we borrowed were picked or blessed by Verne, which was a good way to go. It was really magical," says Stephanie.

Verne would mention an appropriate horse, and the Miracles in Motion volunteers would call the owner to see if they could borrow him or her. They borrowed Verne's trailer, the tack and locations like Mosica and Cedar Rapids Horseman's Club.

Today, at 34 years old, Andy still enjoys classes at Miracles. And, though she never thought she would be riding and benefitting from Miracles herself, Stephanie has found herself atop a steed in the arena for the past couple of years.

"I still get to feel the joy of riding, and I understand the value of the gift the volunteers and horses give from all sides now," says Stephanie. "Andy can't say so, but I know she is grateful for every ride, too."

## Today's Program

Two decades later, Miracles in Motion Therapeutic Equestrian Center has become a well established nonprofit with paid staff, its own facility, almost 180 students and some 200 volunteers.

The organization will celebrate its 20th anniversary with an open house on Saturday, June 21. The public is invited to watch two therapeutic riding classes in the morning. Barn tours and drill team and driving demos will also be held.

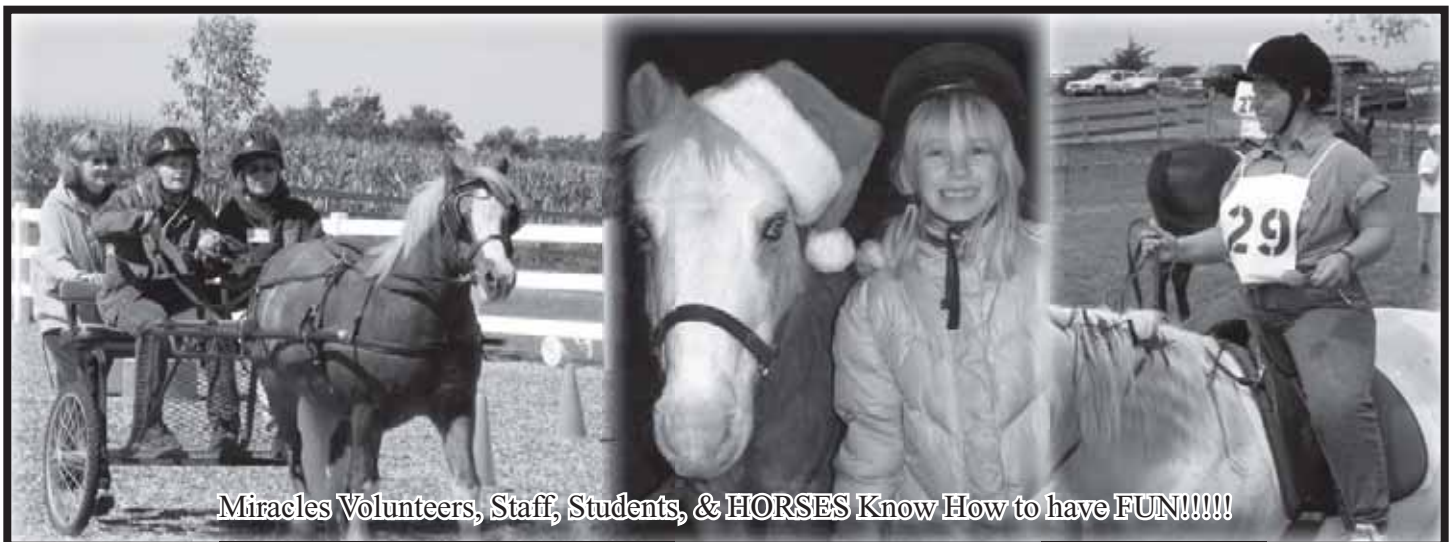
Therapeutic riding is only part of what Miracles in Motion offers today. A horse and cart-driving program was recently added, and in 2002, Miracles started a program for at-risk teens called Leg Up.

"Leg Up focuses on horsemanship from the ground up," says Sue Bock. "Students get to catch, groom, tack and ride — and they learn a lot in the process."

Miracles in Motion horses and volunteers are also made available for local hospitals to conduct doctor-prescribed hippotherapy, led by physical therapists.

Sue explains that Miracles in Motion is a NARHA premier accredited center, meaning it meets the highest standards set forth by the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association. She says that Kate Hladky, former program director, board president and instructor, put a lot of hard work and effort into getting Miracles accredited by NARHA in 1991.

NARHA provides its members valuable



Miracles Volunteers, Staff, Students, & HORSES Know How to have FUN!!!!

continuing education for staff and instructors through its state, regional and national conferences. Since 2004, Miracles in Motion has shared information by hosting NARHA instructor training workshops, which have welcomed people from around the country.

Currently, 19 geldings of all shapes and sizes reside at the 76-acre facility, where rotational grazing pastures are flanked on one side by terraces of hay field and farm crops on the other. Primarily through individual donations and corporate sponsorships, Miracles has acquired a variety of breeds: Shetlands to Morgans, Quarter Horses to Fjords.

Sue says that the keys to an excellent pony or horse are level of training, temperament and soundness. All animals are closely evaluated and trained for a designated number of hours prior to their use by students. And all receive an optimal diet and a regular regime of farrier and veterinary care.

### **The Joy of Horses**

Miracles in Motion not only enriches the lives of its riders, but it has enhanced the lives of hundreds of volunteers. Those who used to own or work with horses can find a place to apply their knowledge as Horse Committee, a specially trained group of volunteers who groom, tack and handle the horses during classes.

Liz Baker of Coralville was drawn to Miracles following many years of involvement with her daughter's dressage pursuits. With

her daughter in college, she lost her connection to horses. But not for long.

"Miracles fulfills my need for wanting to give back. I have a lot of knowledge of horses, having owned them for 15 years," says Liz. "I also love kids, and watching students progress is rewarding. So Miracles covers many bases!"

Bill Boyd of Iowa City, a draft horse owner, joined the Miracles in Motion board in 2006.

"I have found all aspects of horse ownership — training, showing, breeding — to be rewarding throughout my life," Bill says. "It wasn't until I visited Miracles in Motion and observed how thrilled the students were with the time they spent in class that I realized I could help others do the same. "I'm now able, as a board member, to introduce others to the delight of working with horses. I would encourage others to experience the rewards of helping others. I have certainly benefited from my time volunteering at Miracles."

Nan Barta of Saddle & Leather Shop — one of the program's first instructors and a Miracles supporter from the beginning — agrees: "We know what horses have brought to us, so to be able to share that with others is something we cherish."

Experienced horse people are always welcome at Miracles, where volunteer training is free and provided throughout the year. Call 319-857-4141 for details about Miracles in Motion training opportunities, or check [www.miraclesinmotion.net](http://www.miraclesinmotion.net) for calendar dates.

### **A Tribute to Verne Upmier**

(excerpted from August 23, 2003 tribute at Kirkwood Horse Expo)

by Jackie Wallace, *Miracles in Motion* volunteer since 1988

Hundreds of children experienced horses and hay rides at Upmier Stables, but one special rider made a different impact on Verne. Andy wasn't always connected with her world the way other children were, but it was obvious she loved her pony rides. Verne vowed she would always have a pony to ride at his place. The idea grew, and with Verne's quiet but steady support, Miracles in Motion was born.

In its early years, Verne helped keep the program alive in countless ways: finding horses and ponies suitable for the riders, boarding the horses, providing his stable as a class site, equipment storage, the annual Ride-a-Thon, and serving on the Miracles in Motion board of directors. In horseman's terms, to Miracles, Verne was the foundation stock. Without his support, it is unlikely the fledgling program would have survived to grow into the expanded program it is today. It was Verne's unselfish sharing of what he had in life that we honor today.

Thank you, Verne Upmier, from the bottom of our hearts for sharing your enjoyment of horses with all of us!

