

# Metro Family

JULY 2007

Hippotherapy:

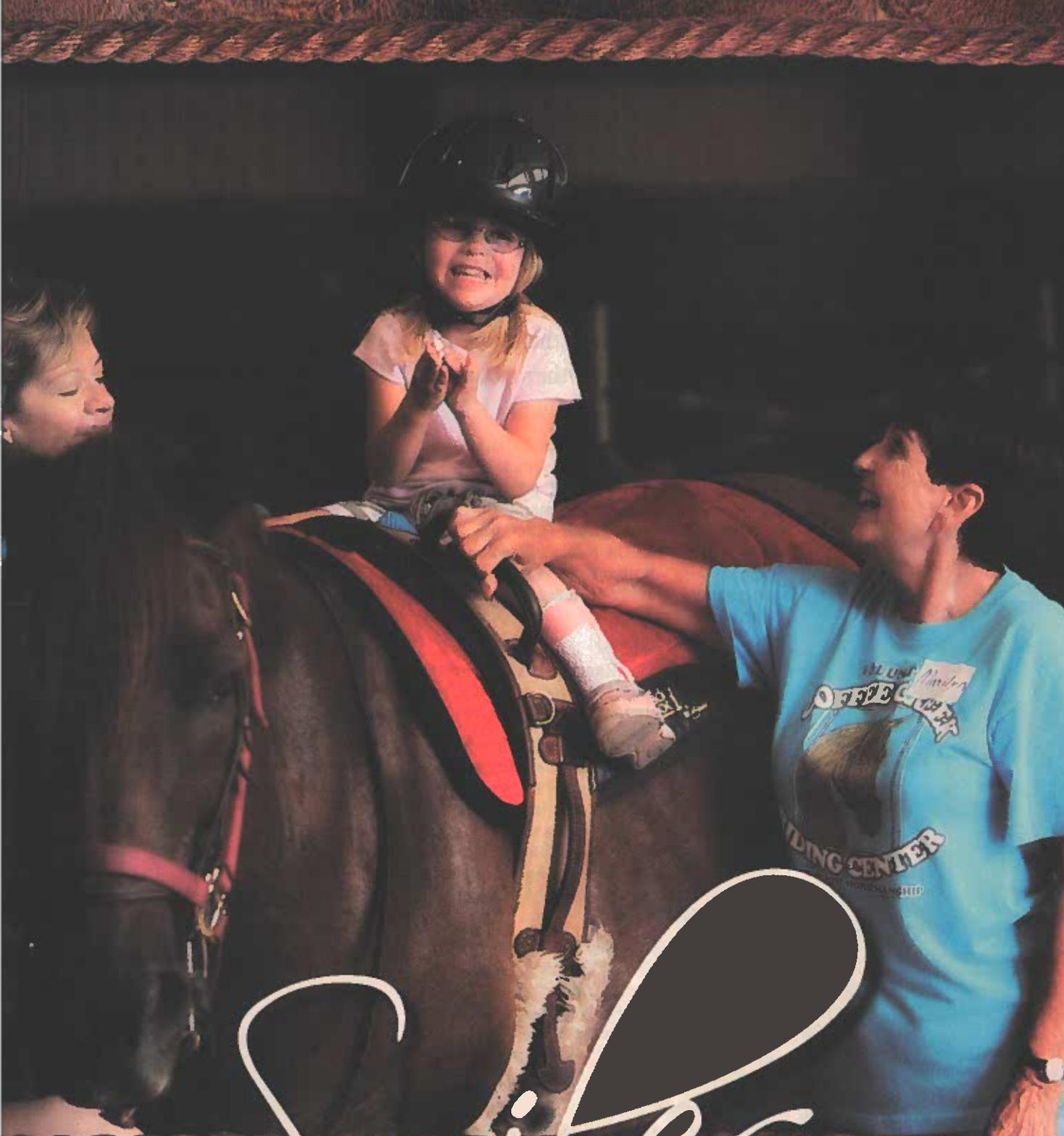
*Smiles*  
on **Horseback**

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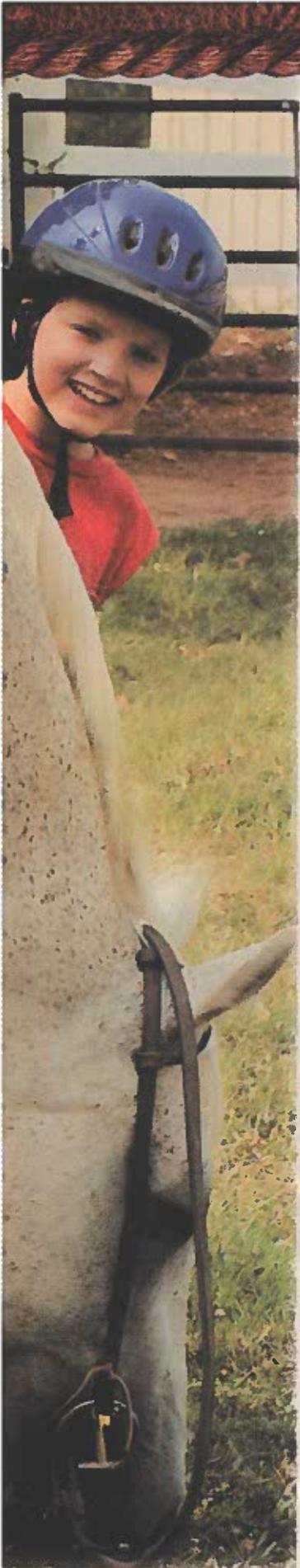
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*Smiles*  
on **Horseback**



The smile was six weeks in coming. It seemed the grade-schooler in Cathy Maxwell's special education class might forever remain passive. Until the class visited the Coffee Creek Riding Center. There, on a five-foot-tall horse, the student learned to smile. Other riders learn to talk or even walk.

In arenas scented by horses and alfalfa, miracles happen. One such arena is the therapeutic horseback riding program at the Coffee Creek Riding Center in Edmond. Another Edmond program, The Sky's the Limit Ranch (The Ranch), provides hippotherapy. Both programs are free. Each program has a director, riders, and volunteers with stories to tell.

#### The Ranch Story

Barry Charles, The Ranch volunteer director, laughs when he says, "I came into the hippotherapy program kicking and screaming."

His skepticism changed to enthusiasm once he met riders like Valorie Noe. Diagnosed with multiple sclerosis at age 44, Valorie says, "When I ride, I gain strength in my arms and legs. I'm not falling nearly as much. Anytime I can stay upright, it's a good thing!" But Valorie's strength wanes during the winter, a situation that could be solved if The Ranch had an indoor arena.

Incorporating other disciplines is key to each participant's success. "There's not a single magic solution for our riders," says Barry. "But riders do see results fairly quickly when additional therapies are in place." Speech, occupational, physical, and/or vision therapy are typical choices.

#### With Knees Bent

Paula Drew agrees. Her son Dillard receives the therapies above as well as osteopathic manipulation therapy. Born 13 weeks early, Dillard weighed 1 pound, 10 ounces. As her son fought for life, Paula prayed, "I want to be his mother, God." During the ensuing months in NICU, Paula says, "I watched Dillard form outside the womb."

Dillard was diagnosed with cerebral palsy around age two; soon thereafter he began horseback riding. "His knees almost touched

when he first sat in the saddle," remembers Paula. But the stiff leg muscles gradually relaxed enough for Dillard to use a wheelchair, then a walker, and then crutches. Recently while posting at Coffee Creek, 13-year-old Dillard shouted "Mom, are you watching?" "I can't help but watch," Paula says. "Dillard is so much stronger since he began horseback riding."

Riders like Dillard and Valorie receive variable, rhythmic, and repetitive sensory input from the horse's walk. That input often leads to a desire, and eventually the ability, to copy a movement pattern similar to the action of the human pelvis while walking.

#### The Coffee Creek Story

The belief in such possibilities, combined with a newly minted faith in God, led Joy Milligan to begin the Coffee Creek Riding Center in 1977. Since then Coffee Creek has been a regular and popular destination for busloads of special education students. The Center also serves individual children accompanied by their parents. "We've always provided free therapeutic horseback riding," says Joy. "Our program is a gift from Jesus to each family, to help them find the highest level of ability, mobility, freedom, and joy."

#### Progress on Horseback

Just ask Doug Ehlinger, and he'll show you the Coffee Creek brand of joy. His mom, Linda, says that after riding, "Doug always makes the sign for horse, the sign for walking, and then he claps." A 13-year-old with Down Syndrome and Dysfunction of Sensory Integration (DSI), Doug has been a rider for six years. "For the longest time I couldn't take Doug to Wal-Mart because he'd get overstimulated," says Linda. "But riding has helped him conquer a lot of sensory issues."



# Ride or Volunteer

## Coffee Creek Riding Center

17 E Coffee Creek Rd, Edmond  
405-340-8377 • CoffeeCreek.org

The Center has indoor and outdoor arenas. Most Coffee Creek riders are between the ages of 2 and 12. Each semester 75 volunteers assist three certified riding instructors who teach 90 students a week. More teen and adult volunteers are needed.

## The Sky's the Limit Ranch

7709 Scarlet Circle, Edmond  
405-317-1639

The Ranch uses a privately-owned acreage with an outdoor arena. About 25 children and adults ride weekly during the summer and fall months. Sessions are conducted by one certified riding instructor and 40 volunteers. Volunteers are needed for Tuesday evening and Saturday morning sessions.

## Riding Outside the Metro Area

**All-Star Therapy Group**, Ramona, OK  
918-371-9723 • allstartherapygroup.org

**Angel Fire Equestrian Center, Inc.**, Coyle, OK  
405-466-1541 • angelfireequestriancenter.org

**Giddy Up-N-Go**, Lawton, OK  
580-248-3701; narntz@lcisp.com

**Harvest Farms Therapeutic Riding Center**, Shawnee, OK • 405-273-1755; harvestfarm.org

**National Institute on Developmental Delays Equestrian Program**, Shawnee, OK  
405-323-0119, nidd.org

**Tenderhooves Therapeutic Riding Center**  
McAlester, OK • 918-429-2065  
tenderhooves@hotmail.com

**The Right Path Riding Academy**, Drumright, OK  
918-352-4110 • rightpathacademy@sbcglobal.net

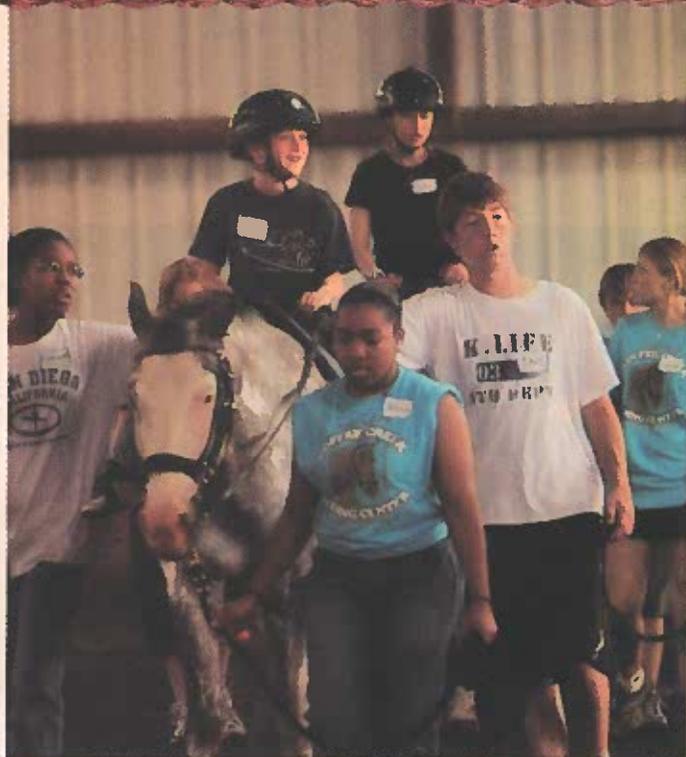
*See our website for a list of Horseback Riding Therapy venues in Oklahoma.*



Karen Alden volunteers at The Ranch and describes watching Jessica and helping other children as "irresistible and inspiring!" Paula Drew volunteers at Coffee Creek. Seeing Dillard's progress is one of the reasons. Another? "One of my greatest joys," Paula says, "is hearing a child giggle."

\* *Definition of hippotherapy terms found on page 14.*

*Lori Williams is a freelance writer who specializes in writing about international adoption and the special needs child. Lori resides in Bethany with her husband Dean and daughter Aurelia.*



Although many disabilities are served at both Coffee Creek and The Ranch, there are occasions when riding is not recommended. "Sometimes an individual's disability or fragility makes participation unsafe," says director Joy. After all, safety is a priority. Helmets are required. Two sidewalkers\* accompany each rider while another volunteer leads the horse. Purposeful riding activities may include and catching blowing and bubbles, shooting baskets, reading, posting, or trotting.

"The movement and challenging work of horseback riding helps organize the brain," says Barry. "This benefits individuals with autism spectrum disorders."

It works for my daughter, 17-year-old Aurelia Williams, who has ridden at The Ranch for five years. Diagnosed with severe language delays and DSI, Aurelia spoke her first word at age six. On the 45-minute car trip home from riding Misty, her favorite horse, Aurelia talks non-stop. It's like she suddenly sees passing landscapes in full color 3-D instead of blurry black and white.

For fellow rider Jessica Alden, who enjoys climbing on bookshelves, sitting atop the back of a horse was easy. The autistic 11-year-old began riding three years ago. "At that time, Jessica rarely spoke," says mom Karen. "She also isolated herself from her peers." After participating in the program, Jessica's more at ease around other kids. After ten minutes of riding and receiving input from the horse's gait, she begins singing. Then, out of the blue, she announces, "I like this."

## Volunteers Needed

There are many who would like to join Jessica and Aurelia at The Ranch. "We have 100 people [riders] on our waiting list," says Barry. "We desperately need more volunteers who like horses, have an interest in helping kids, and can spare three hours a week."