

Dayton Daily News

ONLINE Photos from Friday's Randy Travis concert. www.DaytonDailyNews.com

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Bengals open preseason in shaky fashion against New Orleans. **B1**

TIP OF THE DAY

Check our classifieds for garage sales.

LIFE 20

Local horse park helps disabled find freedom



Claudia Hawke waves to her family during her therapeutic riding lesson at Bridge Riding for the Disabled in Lebanon. On Claudia's left is volunteer Debbie Shear and on the right is Carol Hawke.

Staff photos by Jim Noelker

Nonprofit organization makes learning fun

By Margo Rutledge Kissell
Staff Writer

LEBANON — From his saddle atop a registered Clydesdale, 6-year-old Weston Neubauer spots the blue, plastic clip-on fish along a wall of the horse arena.

Volunteer Denise Haws asks the Miamisburg boy what color it is and later holds another yellow one in her hand for him to grab.

"Oh, you got it!" she tells the boy who was born with fetal alcohol syndrome.

Wearing a wide grin beneath his helmet, Weston clips the rings onto his saddle, where a chain is forming, as the gentle 21-year-old horse named Sally continues the slow walk around the indoor arena at Bridge Riding for the Disabled in Lebanon.

The nonprofit organization helps disabled people find freedom through their experiences with horses.

As he rides, Weston is working on his balance, fine motor skills, speech and socialization.

"He's having so much fun, he has no idea he's working on those things," said his mother, Angie Neubauer. She and her husband, Bob, adopted Weston when he



Cutler Ridge Farm in Lebanon became home to a therapeutic riding program for the disabled when the program's founder died last year.

was 20 months old.

Bridge Riding was founded 23 years ago by former special education instructor Jane Kellerman of Waynesville. When Kellerman died in September of breast cancer, board member and instructor Patricia "Pat" Howe couldn't bear to watch the program come to an end.

The former corporate executive and her husband took control and built the riding arena on their 10-acre horse farm.

Howe remembers becoming

hooked on horses when, at age 12, she received her first pony.

"I always had a love for them," she said. Her eyes fill with tears as she talks about what she's able to offer the children and others with disabilities who come here.

"The thing that gets into my heart the most," she said, "is I can help them have the same experience I have had with horses."

»» How the program helps the kids and how you can help Article on A4

Horse park helps disabled develop

Nonprofit program in Lebanon builds confidence and other skills.

By Margo Rutledge Kissell
Staff Writer

LEBANON — "Walk on, Corey," 11-year-old Claudia Hawke of Mason commands as she clutches the reins of the Haflinger draft pony.

The girl, who is deaf in one ear and has a hearing impairment in the other, wasn't talking when she started the therapy riding lessons more than four years ago. She was only using sign language, her father Jon Hawke said.

Now she's chatting up a storm with Corey, as well as the three volunteers at her side during the hour-long lesson at Bridge Riding for the Disabled.

"It really builds her confidence," her father said of Claudia, who also has a disorder that causes low muscle tone.

During the session, the girl demonstrates her skill weaving the horse through a series of orange cones.

"Show me how well you can steer," said Pat Howe, who runs the program with her husband, Bill, at their private West Pekin Road horse farm.

Dr. Alison Crocker of Bellbrook got her 6-year-old daughter, Dasha, who has cerebral palsy, involved when she was 3. Crocker thought horse riding would be a fun, therapeutic escape for Dasha from all her doctor appointments.

"I'm a veterinarian, and she's ridden a horse more than I have," Crocker said.

All of the riders experience one or more physical, cognitive or sensory disabilities such as cerebral palsy, blindness, hearing impairment, multiple sclerosis or autism.

Seventy-five percent of the students are young-

How to help

Tax-deductible donations may be made to "Bridge Riding for the Disabled Inc.," 743 W. Pekin Road, Lebanon, OH 45036.

For more information or to volunteer, call program director Pat Howe at (937) 654-4693 or e-mail her at howe.pm@earthlink.net.

er than 18, and most are between the ages 4 and 12. Lessons are tailored to meet individual needs.

Only the most obedient horses are chosen.

"They really have to be bomb proof," said Howe, a former executive with Relizon Company who has a master's degree from Antioch University McGregor. She said managing a not-for-profit organization is different than the corporate world because there are currently no paid employees, only volunteers. It's not even a paid position for Howe, who hopes to make the program sustainable long-term. The \$40 lesson charge helps feed the horses.

The program is gearing up for a Sept. 12 ride-a-thon to raise money and help the program grow so it can serve more riders. About 10 people are on a waiting list to participate in the program, which operates with the help of more than 100 volunteers.

Near the end of the lesson, the three riders use their muscles and fine motor skills to groom their horses by brushing them and tying ribbons or putting hair clips on their manes.

"You look like an angel," Claudia tells Corey, before parading the horse around the arena.

Laura Hawke said this has given her daughter a sense of pride.