



History

Majestic Hills Ranch program, founded in 1997, offers Therapeutic Horseback Riding and Equine Assisted Activities.

Majestic Hills Ranch (MHR) is a nonprofit organization that provides reputable, safe, and enjoyable therapeutic riding to children and young adults with special needs, and rehabilitative services to injured armed forces personnel, active duty and veterans in rehabilitation. Many individuals are either born with a disability, or through disease, an injury, neglect, trauma, or abuse, they endure many different challenges. Whether physical, mental, or emotional, the disability or chronic illness becomes the first of many trials these individuals will face. The simple chores of everyday living that healthy people take for granted create anxiety, fear, and sometimes a sense of failure for people facing mental or physical difficulties, and this prevents them from participating fully in life.

Jackie, the granddaughter of the Foundation's Chair Kim Howard, was born with Recurrent Respiratory Papillomas – a disease of the airway. Her life expectancy was estimated to be short, but her feisty spirit and faith kept her going. At 6 years old, they diagnosed lung cancer and operated to remove the lower right lobe of her lung and then went on various chemotherapy treatments which disabled her greatly. Jackie could no longer walk or lift her legs; she ached all over. It was then that Kim thought of therapeutic horse riding to loosen her muscles, for none of the other therapies had worked. Once Jackie was placed on the horse and riding, she was again smiling, and seemed to forget the pain and her disability. In a short period of time Jackie was not only walking, giggling, dancing, and roller skating down the street, she was riding every day, gaining more confidence and strength than ever! Yes, Jackie's life was short – she passed at 19 years of age from lung cancer, but the animals helped her keep her strength and spirits up.

Having experienced the benefits of therapeutic riding first hand with Jackie, and seeing the amazing results physically, emotionally, and socially that was a direct result of working with animals; Kim decided to create the same advantage for other children who face difficult challenges. Majestic Hills Ranch, 105 acres of beautiful rolling hills located in scenic Dakota County, was purchased in 1997. In 1998, a Board was formed, and Majestic Hills Ranch was now a reality. In 1999, MHR was granted a 501(c)(3) status.

Throughout the years, the generous support of various foundations, companies, and individuals has allowed the ranch to expand from the original, single 12-stall stable to what it is now. The fenced-in, outdoor riding arena has a wheelchair ramp and seating for parents and siblings, all adjacent to the parking lot. There is also a picnic area, bonfire pit, a hay wagon that accommodates wheelchairs, and a small petting zoo. In 2010, a smaller second outdoor arena was added for an advanced riding program for children and young adults to learn independent riding skills. In 2010, with the addition of the second arena, complete with a customized hydraulic lift and ramp, we established our "Heroes on Horseback" program. MHR partnered with the Minneapolis VA Medical Center, Poly-Trauma Unit, and have made the commitment to bring these same benefits of Equine Assisted Activities & Therapeutic Riding to our Injured Armed Forces Personnel, Active Duty & Veterans in rehabilitation, who have sacrificed so much to keep us safe. It is a small way of helping them for all they have given and for all they have lost.

Season statistics for the past years:

2007 - 2,447 hours of therapy were received by 100 children, provided with the assistance of 117 volunteers. These volunteers gave 6,754 hours of their time to the program, while another 2,403 hours were dedicated by volunteers from various groups for ground maintenance and events.

2008 - MHR began charging a minimal fee to help support the program and care for the animals. For 2008, 81 children were active riders, and over 350 additional children combined to receive 2,964 hours of therapy. 5,840 hours were also donated to the Ranch by 161 volunteers.

2009 – 85 children were active riders, and over 200 additional children combined to receive 2,284 hours of therapy. 4,185 hours were also donated to the Ranch by 180 volunteers.

2010 – MHR had 95 riders in the Children’s program, including 9 that rode in our newly created independent riding program, for riders who had advanced beyond the level of the current riding program. 2010 also saw the beginning of our “Heroes on Horseback” Veteran’s program. Working in conjunction with the VA Medical Center, MHR started serving in-patients who had reached a level of recovery and were able to start rehabilitative riding sessions. Towards the end of the season we started working with outpatients referred by physical therapists and from doctors who felt this type of activity would be beneficial to their healing process. 15 veterans became involved with Majestic Hills and received equine services that aligned with their injuries. Over 200 volunteers helped with all of the programs, including day camps for both Cornerstone and HopeKids, and put in 4,930 hours throughout the season.

2011 – 99 children participated in our program and 14 veteran had over 300 hours of equine assisted activities and therapies. We have 239 volunteers that helped throughout the year, and they put in 5,352 hours of service to our riders.

2012 - 78 children were in the programs and the Heroes on Horseback Program had 380 visits/756 hours of therapies and activities. Volunteers provided 4,914 hours for the children’s programs, 625 hours for the veterans program, and 1,782 hours for picnics and events.

2013 - 82 children and 30 veterans enrolled in our programs and over 394 volunteers helped out with our riding programs, picnics, and special events.

2014 - 75 children participated and 35 veterans with 682.75 hours of equine-assisted therapies and activities. We utilized over 275 volunteers who contributed 5,970 hours for our programs, events, and special projects.

2015 - 67 children participated and 24 veterans with 441.75 hours of therapeutic horseback riding & equine-assisted activities. 260 volunteers provided 5,212 hours to our programs, events, and special projects.

2016 - 83 children and 36 veterans with ended the season with 1,597 hours of therapeutic horseback riding & equine-assisted activities. Over 200 volunteers provided 5,480 hours to our programs, events, and special projects.

Building on the dream

The ranch is open from May - October, weather permitting—which is why we envision the building of an indoor arena that would meet the needs of all of our riders. An indoor arena would let us hold classes in all but the most extreme weather as well as being able to extend our therapy services to our Veterans to be year round. Because we are one of the few facilities in the state that offers Therapeutic Riding and Equine Assisted Activities to our Veterans with disabilities/challenges, having the ability to offer service throughout the year would decrease their rehabilitative time and increase the number of military men and women seen.

Conclusion

Our dream is a reality. We witness miracles every day of up-lifted spirits, increased self-esteem, and new found strengths. We hear from our riders’ parents and families, their therapists, physicians, advocates, teachers, and from the riders themselves about how they are reaching personal goals and gains. Our work can only continue with the shared effort of our community to provide education, therapeutic activities, and the development of youth and our veterans.

Thanks go out to the following organizations that we work with: Dakota County ARC, Hastings Veterans Home, Visually Impaired/Legally Blind Veterans of the State of Minnesota, Minneapolis VA Medical Center, Lakeville Area Public Schools Community Education Department, Minneapolis Veterans Home, MN State Academy for the Deaf, MCF/SHK Challenge Incarceration Program, The Autism Society of Minnesota, Fairview University Hospital, NW Youth and Family Services, Dakota and Scott County Corrections. Majestic Hills will continue to try to reach as many children and young adults with special needs and Veterans in rehabilitation as possible and introduce them to the program and the services the ranch offers.