

On the Right Course With Horses

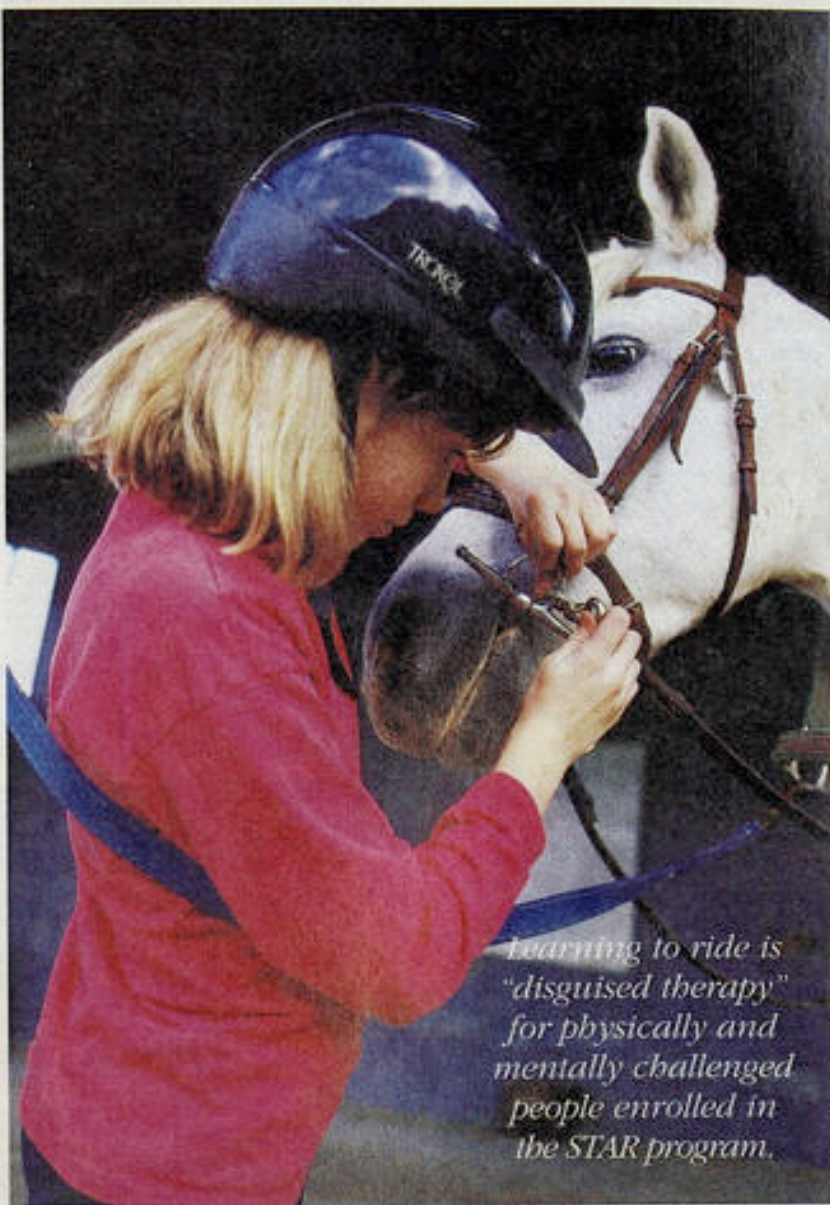
Amy Kerin steadily brushes the burnished coat of Khyamn and ponders the question put before her: What did she have to overcome to learn to ride? Her thoughtful eyes gaze at the pastoral acreage on the outskirts of Knoxville.

"Maybe fear of heights?" riding instructor Lynn Klimas Petr prompts in sotto voice.

"Yeah," Amy agrees, grinning as she recalls those early equine days. "I never knew I was [afraid of heights] until I got on one of these." Rolling her wheelchair closer to the docile giant steed, she pats the animal and adds, "I've always liked horses but that was from down here, not up there." A lifetime wheelchair user, the young woman who was born with spina bifida had rarely had occasion to tower above anyone.

Amy owes overcoming her fears to Lynn, founder and director of the Shangri-La Therapeutic Academy of Riding (STAR).

Begun in 1987, the STAR program now boasts 70 students from the Knoxville area. Lynn and other certified instructors assess each stu-



Learning to ride is "disguised therapy" for physically and mentally challenged people enrolled in the STAR program.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALLEN FOKACH

ABOVE: Jan Parks, here with Molly, rides well enough to use a bridle, something many STAR students can't do because of lack of control.

dent, then design a tailor-made program for that person's particular needs and goals. Lynn's qualifications include a lifetime around horses, an undergraduate degree in special education, and a master's degree in therapeutic recreation, both from the University of Tennessee. She has worked with a variety of physically and mentally challenged children and adults, among them, those with spina bifida, brain injuries, muscular dystrophy, mental retardation, and autism.

The STAR program serves as an adjunct to other therapy or as a means to continue therapy after the person "has been through the sys-

tem," explains STAR staff member Jennifer Kirk. "The system [may have] said, 'Well, this is as good as you're going to get.'" Jennifer is a hippotherapist (physical therapist with an emphasis in the use of horses). Other staff members include advanced riding instructor Jan McElroy, a part-time secretary, a barn manager, two registered instructors, and a legion of volunteers, who side-walk and lead students' horses to ensure safety. Students pay a nominal fee to participate, while grants, donations, and special fundraisers provide for the remainder of STAR expenses.

Some theorize horseback riding



Born with Down Syndrome, Katie Goff was paired with Bucky, a Shetland pony, because of "size and fear factor," says Lynn.

works well as a therapy because the horse's movement is similar to the way a body walks. Other positives for the riding students include learning balance, motor skills, direction following, responsibility, and confidence.

For some of the STAR clients, even sitting on the animal is difficult. When Amy first started riding, she could only lie prone on the horse. Now her ramrod carriage helps her win competitions.

"If you sit here and try to drill riding skills into them, it's not going to be fun," Lynn explains. "We want to make the therapy as much fun as possible so they'll keep wanting to come back. They're having to use a whole lot of skills, but it's disguised therapy."

Improvements range from the subtle (a brain-injured teen relearns how to lean over without support) to the dramatic (a child who has never spoken a word suddenly begins gabbing in class about her STAR horse).

George Pettigrew, 19, remembers wanting to ride a horse so badly as a young boy, he tried to giddy-up on



Straddling BJ, Laura Wright works on stabilizing her neck and trunk with Lynn's assistance. Riding therapy helps with balance and motor skills, as well as self confidence.

one of his family's cows. "I thought if I ride this cow around, they'll see it and say, 'Hey, let's get him a horse,'" he laughs. George comes to the STAR session from the Brain Injured Day Treatment Program at Patricia Neal Rehabilitation Center in Knoxville, recuperating from injuries resulting from a car wreck.

"After my accident, I kind of became very timid," he says. The teenager grins and adds, "[Now] I've been told I'm very cocky."

His riding partner on this day is LeKisha Donehew. "I'm here because of a horse," says the brown-haired, brown-eyed 17-year-old, as she competently prepares Charlie for a ride. She sustained a brain injury when she fell from her own horse, but far from being frightened, LeKisha couldn't wait to ride again.

STAR's success stems in large measure from the 17 horses on "staff." Some, such as Bucky, an adorable diminutive Shetland pony,

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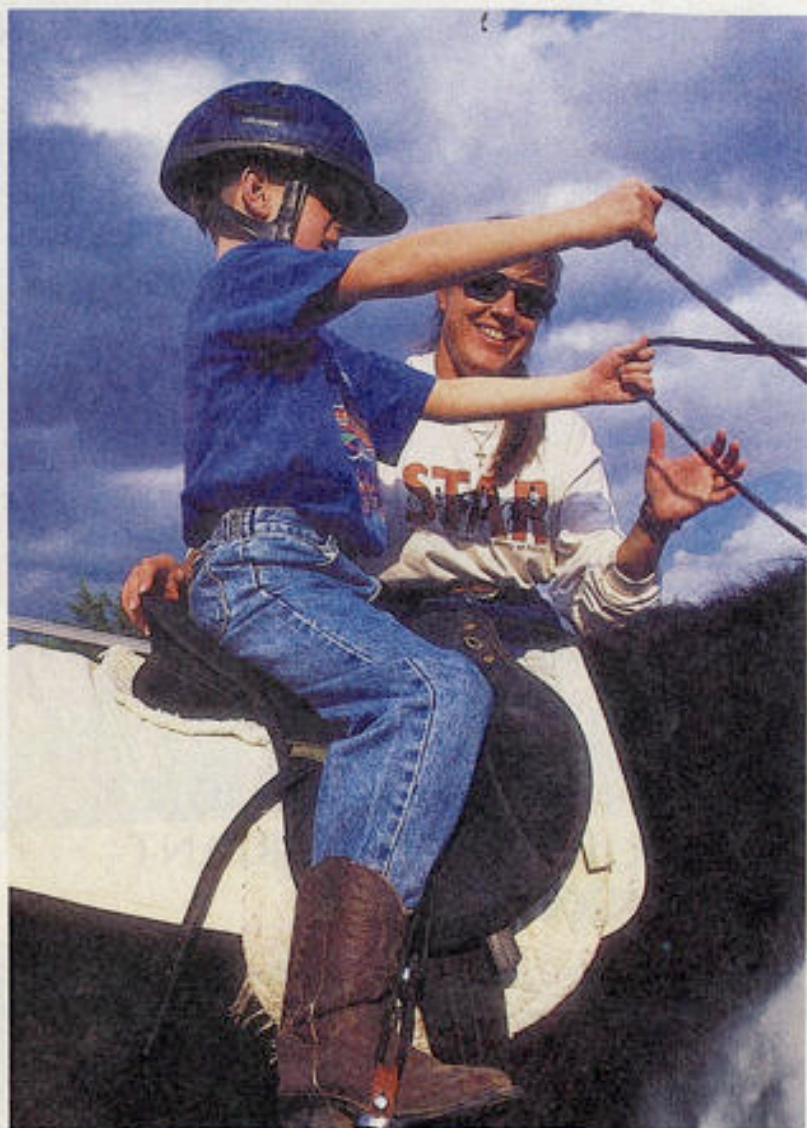
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are donated. "The woman who brought Bucky out said, 'Okay, you either work here or it's to the meater [with you].' Can you imagine saying that to this little fuzzball?" Lynn says. Gentle Bucky has more than earned his keep and has won numerous awards for his "volunteerism." But not every horse offered suits the program. The animal must be sound, have a gentle temperament, and be tolerant of unusual circumstances, such as riders with involuntary muscle spasms.

"I screen [the horses] on their

home turf," explains Lynn. "I ride them and do weird things with them to see what their responses may be. Then we bring them out here, and they go through a two-month training period where we're riding up next to barrels and banging on them, we're using wheelchairs under them, we throw balls. For some horses, this is too weird. Others fit right in."

The program means a lot to the students. At a recent fund-raising Ride-a-Thon for STAR, 5-year-old Anne Ray Henson won a plastic horse for her participation.



"I'm a cowboy," says Web Sowell on Lacy. "You are a cowboy," Lynn responds. Making therapy fun is an important part of the STAR program.



"I couldn't sit on a horse at first," says Amy Kerin. "I was lying down on the horse because I didn't have [built-up] muscles." Now Amy regularly wins competitions riding Khyam.

"I got an award," announces the tiny child who was born with spina bifida, holding up the prize for admiration.

Her mother, Debbie, laughingly adds: "She named the horse STAR and slept with him last night." Debbie scoops up her daughter and carries her to a volunteer assistant. Anne Ray—who up to this point has enthusiastically shared her views on Winnie-the-Pooh, Halloween, and her new shoes—clams up when gently placed on BJ.

"This is new to her, and the horse is intimidating," Debbie says. Not talking helps her feel in control of the situation, the mother explains. Lynn overcomes this silent showdown by offering Anne Ray buttons with the words "Whoa" and "Walk" affixed to the horse's saddle.

"Anne Ray doesn't always want to tell the horse verbally what to do," explains Lynn as she leads BJ and

the pursed lip girl around the ring. "So she can touch her 'Walk' and 'Whoa' buttons." Side-walkers then get the horse to oblige the little girl's commands.

Even without words, Debbie comprehends exactly what the STAR program means to her young daughter. She breaks into a grand smile as she watches Anne Ray progress around the ring. "[Riding a horse] is the closest she has ever had to that walking sensation," the mother comments softly.

Nancy Dorman-Hickson

BECOMING A STAR

For more information on the Shangri-La Therapeutic Academy of Riding, call (423) 690-9285 or (423) 539-6111. For information on other horse therapy programs, call the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association at 1-800-369-7433.

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