

Bringing 'Hope' through horses

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by Molly Reitter

Nineteen-year-old Malcolm Greenwood rides a horse, Rocky, around the arena at Mount Holly's Shining Hope Farms as Debbie Cloy gives him instructions from the ground.



Led by an instructor, Malcolm Greenwood, a man with moderately severe autism, rides a horse, Rocky, around the ring at Shining Hope Farms. (Molly Reitter/MIM photo)

She tells him to touch his left hand to his left foot, and after a little help from one of three volunteers who surround Rocky, he does just that. Due to moderately severe autism, Malcolm Greenwood cannot speak, but at Shining Hope Farms, a horse-based therapeutic treatment farm for children and adults with disabilities, he looks like just another rider.

"The program and staff have always treated Malcolm and other students as individuals that can and will learn if given good instruction, consistent direction and loving praise," said Malcom's mother, Cheryl Greenwood.

Shining Hope Farms uses therapeutic riding techniques and hippotherapy— "hippo" meaning "horse" in Greek – which the American Hippotherapy Association defines as a "physical, occupational and speech language therapy treatment strategy that utilizes equine movement as part of an integrated intervention program to achieve functional outcomes." In other words, with hippotherapy, the horses become the therapists.



People and organizations throughout the Charlotte-area pitched in to help turn a dilapidated farm into a facility for the types of services Shining Hope Farms provides. (Molly Reitter/MIM photo)

Melinda Kirkpatrick and her husband, Paul, the founders and owners of Shining Hope Farms, became involved with hippotherapy when their daughter's 4H club took part in a project involving children who were receiving the therapy. In 2003, they sold their home in the University City area and purchased a run-down horse farm on the edge of Mount Holly.

"We moved to Mount Holly because we found the ideal property to meet the needs of our farm," Melinda Kirkpatrick said. "It was the right amount of acreage and the location was perfect for participants ... being situation between Charlotte and Gastonia."

Before getting to work, however, they family needed to rehabilitate the ramshackle farm. Boy Scout Troops 95 and 313, among others in Mecklenburg County, stepped in to collaborate on an array of projects that ranged from making a small bathroom wheelchair accessible to building a playground for clients' siblings to play on during lessons.

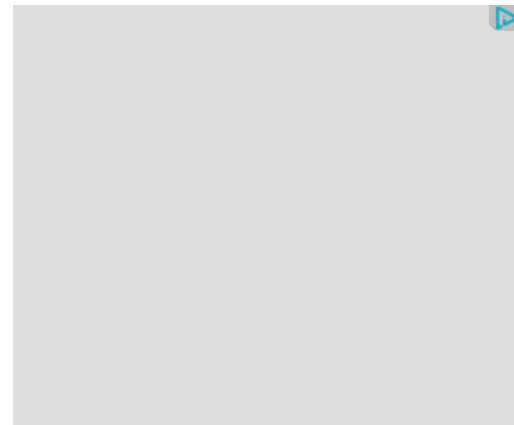
"We could not have accomplished all the things that we have without divine intervention," Melinda Kirkpatrick said.

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The Charlotte Bobcats basketball team also sent over 100 employees and season tickets holders to the farm for its CATS CARE day of community service, while the Community Foundation of Gaston County helped build a much-needed roof, as well as clinic rooms. The farm's therapists use the clinic rooms for physical, occupational and speech language therapy during inclement weather.

Melinda Kirkpatrick said the majority of her clients come away with better head and trunk control, speech improvements, confidence and the ability to follow directions, and Cheryl Greenwood said she has witnessed those same improvements with her son. Although her son does not usually relate well to people or animals, she said he enjoys his time at the farm.

"... He loves going to Shining Hope Farms and is very fond of their staff," she said. "He has learned to follow directions, assist with grooming the horses and learned to handle them gently."

Successful stories like these, Kirkpatrick said, have made the venture worth the time and sacrifice.




"Our dream of providing this horse-based therapy has become a reality."













Want to know more?

All therapists at Shining Hope Farms, located at 328 Whippoorwill Lane in Mount Holly, are certified through the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH). To obtain certification, all instructors and horses must complete a vigorous testing and screening process that ensures all clients receive quality instructors, horses and customized therapy methods.

For more information, call Shining Hope Farms at 704-827-3788 or go online to www.shininghopefarms.org.

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