



Special to The Gazette

Maelee Adams, of Gastonia, rides a horse at Shining Hope Farms in Mount Holly on July 11. She is assisted by occupational therapist Ashley Seal, left, therapy assistant Erin Bodsford, center right, and horse handler Jane Bodsford, right.

A shining example

Gaston therapy nonprofit recognized for transparency

By Wade Allen
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A Gaston nonprofit that offers horse therapy is getting attention for being open about how it uses donations.

Shining Hope Farms in Mount Holly recently earned a gold participation level from GuideStar Exchange. GuideStar gathers financial information about nonprofits and essentially ranks those groups based on transparency and other criteria.

Only 360 out of 90,000 nonprofits listed on the GuideStar website have achieved the gold status. That places the farm in elite company, said Erinn Andrews, senior director of nonprofit strategy with GuideStar.

"It's quite extraordinary, and I think it's something for the nonprofit to shout from the rooftop," she said.

She said the status serves as a level for other nonprofits to aspire to.

But the gold did not come easily. It took time, dedication and lots of paperwork, said Milinda Kirkpatrick, executive director of Shining Hope Farms, which also operates a location in Charlotte.

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Erinn Andrews
senior director of nonprofit strategy with GuideStar

Horseback therapy

The two locations serve 132 children weekly, offering physical therapy in the form of horseback riding.

Riding lessons for children and adults with special needs are also available.

Kirkpatrick said Shining Hope Farms charges a fee for recreational riding but offers help to those unable to pay by searching for sponsors.

GuideStar has a three-tier rating system for nonprofits — gold, silver and bronze. The levels were introduced last month.

Andrews said gold recognizes nonprofits

that provide financial data, information about services offered and share measures for the effectiveness of programs.

She said many of the 360 gold-rated nonprofits are medium-sized and large organizations. Sometimes, smaller nonprofits can't devote time to complete the paperwork and earn gold.

Shining Hope Farms is the exception.

Details about its finances are available on the GuideStar website, including tax records and how it receives funding. Kirkpatrick said such transparency assures potential donors that they're giving to a reputable nonprofit.

Shining Hope had an annual operating budget of around \$200,000 in 2011, the most current financial information presented on GuideStar's website.

Kirkpatrick gives a lot of credit for earning gold status to Jessamyn Dib, who compiled necessary paperwork to present to GuideStar.

Dib is working at the farm for a year through the federal agency AmeriCorps Vista. It engages employees in community service jobs across the country.

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