



RED Arena is a nonprofit organization dedicated to empowering individuals with disabilities through equine assisted activities and therapies. At right are volunteers Caroline Juszczak and Sierra Reed with Bonnie Gibson.



Getting More Than You Give

RED Arena Volunteer Program

It's not surprising to see great changes in individuals who participate in RED Arena's equine therapy program: improved strength, balance, and coordination. Increased verbal skills, confidence, and self-esteem are common, in fact, expected.

What might be unexpected, though, are the changes that happen in lives of the volunteers who stride alongside therapy horses, assisting and safeguarding the riders during their therapy sessions.

Though they devote hours each month walking around an outdoor arena, often in the heat and the cold, for no pay, the volunteers appreciate the benefits of their jobs. "I'd be there every day, if I could," insists volunteer Lisa Rhodes. "And I'm very often thankful," she adds, "that I'm wearing sunglasses—so they can't see my tears of joy!"

Volunteer Sierra Reed says her experience with RED Arena's program helped solidify her decision to become

an occupational therapist. Currently enrolled in Abilene Christian College's kinesiology program, Sierra volunteered at RED Arena during her high school years and still helps with the program when she's home on vacations and breaks. With experience in other horse therapy programs, Sierra is impressed with RED Arena's well-run program. "They are willing to make changes and improve to meet the individual needs of their participants."

"You get more than you give," sums up another volunteer, Caroline Juszczak. "I didn't expect to be blown away by the progress the kids make," she says, telling of the three-year-old twins who weren't yet walking. She vividly recalls the day they got out of the car and walked up the ramp to their riding session.

Caroline also recalls a nonverbal boy whose biggest challenge was learning to talk. One day on the trail ride he blurted out, "Want to throw rocks in pond!" The volunteers reported the incident to his

mom, who shook her head in disbelief, "Oh, he can't string that many words together." The thrill of riding, Caroline thinks, motivates the kids to move beyond their present limitations.

Caroline's main interest was in helping kids, but, like many RED Arena volunteers, she had never been around horses. "That's fine," said executive director Jennifer Young, who guided Caroline through the training program each "side walker" must complete. Caroline says it took only a week for her to overcome any fear of horses. Now she can bridle any of the calm (but sassy) horses in RED Arena's stables.

Through her training and observation at RED Arena in disability awareness and protection, she quickly learned "safety comes first!" RED Arena focuses on accident prevention and security for its participants in all respects—from the well-scrubbed barn and impeccably maintained tack, to the detailed training manual and explicit signage around the facility. The internal operations of the organization are run as efficiently as the barn, confirms Caroline, who proudly serves on the board as vice president.

The volunteers band together with a definite esprit de corps, says Caroline. Though they're a committed group, there's always turnover and a need for new recruits.

"It's heartbreaking to have to cancel a ride for a lack of volunteers," laments Lisa. **To volunteer: redarena.org**



Volunteer Highlight: Patti Clark

For Patti Clark, who devotes her life to the betterment of others, volunteering never felt so good! Patti is the ultimate, professional volunteer who sets a high bar for herself and others every single day. And it is not surprising she has received numerous awards for her work as a philanthropist. Patti's mark is noted throughout the community and beyond. She serves without pay as the executive director of the Austin Zoo and as president of the Friends Foundation, which provides care and support for the elderly. Patti also serves as the treasurer of the

Dripping Springs Women's Club and as a director of the Dripping Springs Community Foundation. Patti's energy is indeed admirable, powerful, and astonishing.