

hill country **view**

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EQUINE MOVEMENT THERAPY HEALS BODIES AND LIFTS SPIRITS

**BLANCO BOWLING ALLEY
OFFERS GERMAN-STYLE
BOWLING EXPERIENCE**

**DEBORAH TREECE
ON MENTORING CHILDREN
OF INCARCERATED PARENTS**

**LOCAL CAR & BIKE RALLY
BENEFITS A VARIETY OF
CHILDREN'S CHARITIES**

A photograph of a brown horse grazing in a green field under a clear blue sky. The horse is the central focus, with its head down eating grass. The background is slightly blurred, showing a fence and some trees.

THE MAGIC OF HORSES

Physical therapist taps into
the healing power of
horses to treat clients

**Story and photos
by Rebecca L. Bennett**

Jennifer Young used to be afraid of horses.

In physical therapy school, she had learned about hippotherapy, the practice of using equine movement to treat various types of disabilities. But it wasn't until she witnessed a session at the Ride On Center for Kids (ROCK) in Georgetown that she began to consider whether some of her clients would benefit from riding.

Curious, Jennifer got certified as an American Hippotherapy Association (AHA) therapist, leased a horse, secured the help of an experienced local horsewoman, and hoisted Sarah, a young girl with a form of cerebral palsy called hemiplegia, into a saddle.

"She was like a different kid on the horse, and I've known her for her whole life, from six months old to five years old," Jennifer says. "The change in her was phenomenal, and then I was really hooked."

Jennifer resolved to buy a horse and incorporate equine therapy into her practice. In January 2008, she met Bo, a tall, white-and-brown-speckled quarter horse with a regal bloodline, a winning record as a national championship racehorse, and no place to call home. He had been abandoned by his former owner at a local trainer's barn and would have soon gone up for auction if Jennifer hadn't spoken for him. Jennifer began taking riding lessons on Bo and slowly gained confidence with him, replacing her former fear of horses with a healthy respect for their power.

"I became very attached to Bo. I rescued him, so we had this bond," says Jennifer, who soon began asking Bo to help with physical therapy sessions. "Racehorses are not quintessential therapy horses. They're very big, but he was the best we had to work with at the time."

With Bo's help, Jennifer began taking on more clients who wanted to try equine therapy, including a



little girl named Regan who doctors predicted would never walk again. Regan often shut down during therapy sessions, but as soon as Jennifer settled her onto Bo's back and began leading them around the arena, something clicked in Regan's mind and body.

However, Bo soon began pawing at his stomach, a sure sign of colic—a serious medical condition that causes horses severe abdominal pain, gastrointestinal complications, and often death. Jennifer had to end Regan's session early and rush Bo to the vet. There, she received a grave diagnosis: She would have to put Bo through emergency colic surgery, a costly procedure that would likely only prolong his agony, or say goodbye.





In her grief, Jennifer chose not only to end Bo's suffering but also her involvement in hippotherapy. She interpreted the loss as a sign that she should refocus her priorities on her family and on more traditional treatment methods. She began calling her clients to let them know.

But when she phoned Regan's mom, Marie, she learned that a miracle had happened. Just one day after Regan's first and only therapy session on Bo, the girl had walked across her family's living room and into her father's arms.

"It was the timing. She just hadn't felt that through her body yet. She needed to feel all of that weight shift in her pelvis," Jennifer explains. "That was it for me. I thought, 'Obviously, this is what I'm supposed to be doing.' And then we were all in, and it just kind of exploded from there."

Jennifer bought a new horse and 20 acres of hill country scrub and relocated her family to Dripping Springs. As word spread, demand for her equine therapy sessions soared,

and neighbors began reaching out in search of ways to support her work. Jennifer soon realized that her modest side operation had far outgrown the bounds of her private practice; and so she gathered her courage, stretched out of her comfort zone, and founded RED Arena as a 501c3 nonprofit organization.

"When I started, I had six kids that I was seeing out here, and now we see about 118 a week," says Jennifer. She attributes RED Arena's success to her "phenomenal" team of volunteers, instructors, board members, and trainers and to the generosity of the Dripping Springs community.

"It's been a lot of work, but there just hasn't been an obstacle that we haven't been able to overcome or solve," she says. "I think it's because so many people here know the healing power of horses personally... and even the volunteers, they come here and they work so hard, and they feel like they are leaving with their cup full even though they gave so much."

In pursuit of its mission to empower disabled individuals through horses, RED Arena provides children and adults with physical therapy, speech therapy, occupational therapy, riding lessons with nationally-certified instructors, job training in barn management and horse care, and counseling services.

RED also hosts an annual summer camp and a rodeo called "Round-Up" for children of all ability levels, which Jennifer hopes will bridge social gaps between disabled kids and their peers by encouraging them to bond through their shared interest in riding. It all goes back to Jennifer's personal mission to set "her kids" up for success as whole people.

"If I'm just working on how they're walking, I'm not addressing that whole child; but boy, if I get them on a horse, not only am I working on their core strength and their weight shift for their walking, but I'm also working on their communication with their team, their empathy for the horse, and I'm building their self-esteem,



Learn more about RED Arena
at www.redarena.org.

character, and confidence," says Jennifer. "That's what we give here."

As a physical therapist, Jennifer could talk all day about the immense good that can come from utilizing a horse's natural dynamic movements to improve a person's mobility, but ultimately, she attributes the power of working with horses to their innate ability to develop emotional connections with their riders and understand what each individual needs.

"They just know," Jennifer says, recounting the story of a competitive baseball player who had come to RED after being struck by a car during a family vacation. He had lost not only his mobility on one side of his body but also his promising future in sports and had grown deeply depressed.

"We had this horse, Dolly, and she was so grumpy, but she was completely different with him," Jennifer says. "She would nuzzle him, he would take her head and hug her, and she would just sink into him. He would just let it all out on her, and she would take it."

Thanks to Dolly, instead of sinking farther into despair, the boy was able to heal. He became the trainer for Lake Travis' baseball team and is currently pursuing a postsecondary degree in athletic training.

"To have that much challenge and then have success – it's just magical," said Jennifer. "We get to do that. We get to be that for them." ■

