



Project RIDE

Written by **KRISTIN BERKERY**

"It's one of Elk Grove's best-kept secrets," says Marisa DeSalles, Community Outreach Manager for Project RIDE, a therapeutic horse riding program that serves more than 500 area students. Many residents who have lived here for years don't even know about this hidden gem; but Marisa is working to change that.

Less than a mile from Old Town Elk Grove you'll find Project RIDE's facility, which is often buzzing with activity. It's tucked behind the Cosumnes Community Services District building on Elk Grove Boulevard that burned in 2015 and is awaiting reconstruction. As you approach Project RIDE, the first buildings you notice belong to Jessie Baker School, which has an important relationship with the riding program.

"Project RIDE tells the story of Elk Grove's transition from a rural community to a suburb of Sacramento," says Marisa. When the program first started in 1979, Elk Grove was an unincorporated small town with just 10,000 residents. Chris McParland, an adaptive physical education teacher for the disabled students of Jessie Baker School, had the idea of pairing gentle horses with her students to help them develop new physical and mental skills. Friends loaned their horses and arenas, and volunteers assisted with the students.

The program was such a hit with riders, parents, and volunteers that it continued to expand throughout the 1980s and '90s, mirroring the growing community around it. When you visit Project RIDE today, you'll find a 34,000 square foot enclosed arena, nature trail, and round pen within walking distance of Jessie Baker School, which still sends students over for lessons.

Project RIDE also welcomes disabled and other special needs riders from all over, including Davis, Stockton, and Folsom. "Our oldest rider was a 98-year-old woman who'd had a stroke," says Marisa. "She was a cowgirl when she was younger and riding a horse one last time was on her bucket list. She loved it!"

Many Project RIDE students have disabilities like cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, autism, brain injuries, and neurodevelopmental conditions. But Marisa is quick to note that Project RIDE isn't about simply leading these kids around on horses. "It's much bigger than that,"

she says. "We put medically fragile children on one thousand pound animals and their parents get to see them blossom. For kids with cerebral palsy whose muscles are tight and restrictive, we see their limbs loosen and they start having fun. It's like physical therapy, but much more enjoyable for the child.

"For kids with autism, they might have a rough day with too much stimulation, which is hard for both the parents and children," continues Marisa, "but they get on a horse and the stress melts away. Life is challenging for their parents, but for 30 minutes they can watch their children be happy. It's such a relief for them." Those are the kinds of experiences she says she looks forward to every day.

Karen Vanderspek's daughter, Sophia, is one of the many children who have been transformed by Project RIDE. Nine-year-old Sophia has cerebral palsy and is non-verbal, but she's expressive, funny, and loves being around people. When she was three years old, her therapists



Above photo: "Sophia lights up every week when she rolls up to the barn on Tuesday afternoons," says her mother Karen Vanderspek. Instructor Lauren Bender secures Sophia on Stella's back. Photos on page 21 starting from top right to left: Volunteer Sophia Williams with Bella. Sidewalkers Leann Carlson (left) and Sunia Suhail (right) secure rider Pat, while Sandy Hastie leads Jazz. Volunteers Kent Oliver (left) and Molly Winters (right) help student Evaleen into the riding arena. Riding instructor Genell Csik with Lucky.



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recommended Project RIDE to help build her muscles and keep her active. Sophia had very little core strength, so she began her lessons on Stella, a mechanical therapy horse that helps riders become stronger. After a year, Sophia was ready to try a real horse. It was quite a moment at the arena.

"The first time Sophia got on a horse, she was beaming with excitement," says Karen. "Many people, including Project RIDE staff, showed up that day just to watch and celebrate with her. We were so proud of her and knew how hard she worked to get to that point. Today she's able to sit up better on her own and has much more muscle tone."

Sophia gets to meet all the new horses that are being considered for the program, and they must pass "the Sophia test" to ensure they're comfortable around wheelchairs. Karen and her husband Leon are now actively involved in Project RIDE's fundraising events and board of directors. "We're truly grateful

for all of the volunteers and workers who pour their hearts into this program to make it such a special place," says Karen.

Project RIDE is accredited by PATH International, previously known as the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association, an organization founded in 1969 to promote the use of horses as therapy for people with special needs. Project RIDE has four instructors who are certified by PATH, which ensures they're expert riders who understand every disability their students have and can match each rider with their ideal mount.

Tamara Lipanovich, one of the program's PATH-certified instructors, recalls a recent lesson when she put a fragile student on one of their most trusted horses. "This student was non-verbal so I worked with her to tap the horse on the withers to tell him to walk forward," says Tamara. "I would stop the horse, tell the student to tap, and cue the horse to walk. After several repetitions, her

little hand beat me to it and tapped the horse before I could tell her. The person leading the horse moved them forward and the girl lit up with a face-filling smile showing she understood she had prompted the horse to move. Her parents, the volunteers, and I had tears in our eyes."

Tamara grew up riding any horse she could find and has owned her own horse for 15 years. She learned about Project RIDE in 2011 when she was searching for an organization to volunteer for. "I started as a sidewalker, securing students on the horse during the lesson," says Tamara, "and it didn't take long for me to become the person leading the horse. After about three years, I decided to become PATH-certified. I have a Master's Degree in Special Education, so this was a natural step forward for me. It took about six months to become certified - I had to pass two skills tests and attend a training workshop. I'm currently working on my Advanced Instructor Certification."

Above top and bottom: Volunteers Molly Winters (left) and Margie Burton prepare for the next riding lesson. Volunteers secure Sophia on Stella. At right, student Evaleen gives Blaze some affection, while volunteer Margie Burton leads. Photo on page 23: Student Evaleen on Blaze.





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Like the students, Project RIDE's horses are also very special. They must be calm, gentle, and easy to trailer, but otherwise they come in all shapes, colors, and sizes. Currently, they have a retired racing Standardbred, a retired police horse, a draft horse, and a Fjord, among others. There are typically 10 to 15 horses at the main facility during lessons and each horse works for a week, then takes a week off. When the horses aren't working, they enjoy their break on 52 acres in nearby Herald.

Project RIDE's horses are provided through lease-loan agreements that allow the owners to take their horses back if they choose. It's a perfect opportunity for older, sound horses to be regularly handled and cared for with no cost to the owners.

Not every horse that's considered for the program is chosen, but some horses surprise the instructors. Tamara is evaluating a new horse who seemed like he might be edgy. "He was a little bit high-headed, so I watched him carefully the first time I put a special needs student on him," says Tamara. "I secured the student and gave the sidewalkers instructions. As the horse stepped away, I think he understood the cargo he was entrusted with - he lowered his head and licked his lips, a sign of acceptance and relaxation. He knew this was his job and he was taking it seriously."



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Every rider requires three volunteers - one to lead the horse and two to keep the student secure. Each lesson has about five students, meaning 15 adult volunteers are usually needed for each class.



Like most non-profit programs, volunteers are the engine that keeps Project RIDE moving forward. In addition to the riding instructors, they have a small administrative staff; but many day-to-day activities like data entry, event planning, barn upkeep, and stall cleaning are done by volunteers. Experience with horses isn't necessary, although horse lovers are encouraged to donate their time as well.

Marisa started with Project RIDE as a volunteer coordinator, which she calls "one of the toughest jobs here." Every rider requires three volunteers - one to lead the horse and two to keep the student secure. Each lesson has about five students, meaning 15 adult volunteers are usually needed for each class. "If you schedule too many volunteers, the

extra ones sit around feeling underutilized. Too few and you can't hold the lesson," says Marisa. Fortunately local colleges like Sacramento State are a good source of volunteers because they offer earned education credits for students who assist at Project RIDE. In fact, Marisa says, "most of the Sacramento State nursing program graduates are likely to have worked with our kids here."

And then there are the bustling fundraising events that help pay Project RIDE's expenses, including a crab feed each January, a steak dinner in April, a spaghetti dinner in September, and a newly-added craft bazaar in the fall. The family-oriented spaghetti feed attracts more than 1,000 attendees and offers carnival games and a special rider talent show. The more intimate steak dinner in April is an elegant cowboy supper and live auction that draws 400 guests. Project RIDE events are a tradition for many local families and tickets often sell out two months in advance.

Project RIDE is expanding into new areas to meet even more of the community's needs. There's a long waiting list for new riders, so

the program will construct an open arena this year to increase the number of lessons. "We'd like to serve every child in need with this addition," says Marisa. Project RIDE may also expand into equine-facilitated mental health, which helps patients develop relationships with horses as a form of psychotherapy. New programs are being designed now that could eventually serve local at-risk youth, disabled adults, and veterans. A fourth PATH-certified instructor recently joined the team as well.

For nearly 40 years Project RIDE has quietly made a difference in the lives of Elk Grove residents, and that's what keeps the students, volunteers, and staff coming back. Instructor Tamara says it best: "No matter what's going on in my life, coming to work always puts a smile on my face."

(Photos on page 24) Lucky and volunteer Sandy Hastie. Above photos on left: Volunteer Leann Carlson with Bella. On right: Each lesson takes a team of volunteers. From left, Kurt Michaelsen, rider Marques, Leann Carlson, Loran Hines, Sophia Williams, Sumia Suhail, and riding instructor Lauren Bender.