

“Dreams are born on the back of a therapeutic riding horse. These unique animals touch the hearts and shape the lives of those who ride them with a spirit that overcomes disabilities...”

BERNADETTE OLSEN, PROGRAM FOUNDER & DIRECTOR
BACK BAY THERAPEUTIC RIDING CLUB



A Sustainable Horse, of Course

Anyone who thinks Newport Beach is not a diverse community has never seen the amazing equestrian neighborhoods.

At Back Bay Therapeutic Riding Center, individuals with disabilities meet Bernadette Olson, owner, mother of students at Mariners Elementary School and certified Advanced Instructor.

So, how can a horse provide therapy?

Therapeutic riding is a dynamic way to improve balance, joint mobility, coordination, muscle tone and posture. But those are clinical benefits – what you'd read in a textbook.



BY JIM FITZPATRICK

In a visit to the center, you will see wide unpaved sidewalks. How else can a horse get to the Back Bay? The frontage is a beautiful home, but out back there are stables of horses, rescued or donated, and chickens and goats, oh my.

witnessed adoring parents watch their

young daughter with cerebral palsy. In a classroom, instructors work on strength, balance or speech. On a horse - Skippy, the donated paint with fancy bloodlines - this special little girl loves to go fast. Bernadette Olson works with her to sit up and, on the speech incentive plan, to muster the word “Go,” so the horse will trot.

At the end, when she feeds the horse, the little girl must look up, no easy task so she can look the horse in the eyes as she shares a carrot. Then off into the loving arms of her parents, only to return again next Monday.

The horse provides the experience of almost human walking, 120 steps a minute. Three-dimensional, up and down, side to side, back and forth.

Easy for you.

The horse allows wheelchair-bound individuals to participate in a Back Bay hike. The beauty, the smells, the sounds. Imagine a blind boy, riding his own horse, guided by others, hearing the sounds of the hoof, delightfully listening to every crunch of an apple, a horse whisper to him.

On Friday, local girls with eating disorders come with the idea to provide service to others, and learn to care for the horses. A real-life experience as a metaphor of life. They learn to brush and deliver spa-like treatments to the horse, who demonstrates unconditional love in a non-judgmental way. Many of the horses are rescued, with stories the youths can relate to. It feels good to give



Mariners kindergartner Kate Fitzpatrick, 5, sits on Blue as Bernadette Olson holds the lead rope.

back, providing an opportunity to know they did good deeds. Some overcome fears or control issues and learn to socialize. Others build confidence and skills as leaders, and some become the future sidewalkers for the Center.

The Olsens - Bernadette, husband Jeff with Mariner's Elementary School children Leo and Jeffery - brought their farm animals to Mariner's School. What a village that raises these students.

Fellow students had the opportunity to experience a horse ride with a brief trot. To feed Blue or Laddy a carrot while learning how to care for the ponies. They got to pet the good goat, Angelina, while bad-boy head-butting husband, Brad, stayed home. Get it? They got to see the biodiversity of goats doing their business. They got to pet a duck's soft feathers, see chickens, and talk about eggs so they understand that food does not come from

the Ralphs bush.

Students learned that for a dog you multiply by seven years, and for horses times two. When a horse won't eat, it is time to call the vet. When a horse steps on your toe, it is your fault. When a horse's ears go back, he is mad, when up, listening and when front they are saying “feed me.” They learned that Blue, the pony, was owned by a little girl who passed away. Blue was donated to work with kids, so kids may find happiness.

The highlight of the morning was to watch Blue do a jump. Not to be outdone by the young pony, retiring Mrs. Blue, of Kindergarten fame, gracefully did the same jump as teachers Mrs. Boyd and Mrs. Dory watched in peer admiration.

This entire experience demonstrates a sustainable community. It is not just about hugging a tree. And, I bet, if you asked politely, the Olsens would give you some horse manure, excellent for composting.

Typically, after the Back Bay Therapeutic Riding Center receives a little press for the wonderful efforts and achievements, they receive donations. All are welcome. The \$20 from individuals is appreciated and goes to good use. But what they really need are corporate sponsorships. For \$5,000, you can provide for a horse and the special sustainable community benefits they deliver to individuals with disabilities. “Check” out BackBayTRC.org for additional info and opportunities to support.

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