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FROM THE ARCHIVES

Horse healing

Nevada Joe brings smiles nationwide as he embarks on second year as NARHA horse ambassador

by KRISTIN KNIGHT- Ravalli Republic



From left, Diane Purcelli and Pat Busenbark lead Alex Fridley, who rides Nevada Joe, at the Shooting Star Ranch in Darby. Alex had the honor of riding Joe at his therapeutic riding lesson on Wednesday. REBECCA STUMPF - Ravalli Republic

DARBY - "Do you want to come ride again on Saturday?" asked Diane Purcelli, owner of Shooting Star Ranch, to one of her students.

His face a blush and his grin reaching from one ear to the other, Alex Fridley, 11, nodded.

Alex, recipient of the first-ever Darby Parent-Teacher Association/WAHL Clipper scholarship, has found a new joy in riding horses at Shooting Star Ranch. The ranch specializes in equine-assisted activities, commonly known as therapeutic riding. It's a place where kids like Alex, who has been diagnosed with high-functioning autism, can go to feel confident, strong and accepted.

"The whole core of the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association and Shooting Star is to ride to the rider's ability, not to their disability," Purcelli said. "The goal is for the riders to ride independent, without someone leading them, and 80 percent of our students do."

On Wednesday, Alex finished a riding lesson on Nevada Joe, a wild mustang who was captured by the Bureau of Land Management in 2000 and in only six years has become a national celebrity in the therapeutic riding world.

"He's a horse, but you cannot believe how many people know him coast to coast," Purcelli said.

Recently, Diane was on the West coast with Nevada Joe while her husband, Ernie, was in Massachusetts.

"People found out Ernie was the owner of Nevada Joe and sat down and talked his ear off about him, while I was on the other side of the country doing a show with him," Purcelli said.

Joe has his very own Breyer horse doll and also is featured on every package of Wahl clippers. He also has his own Tucker Nevada Joe saddle.

He even gets fan mail. One of his biggest fans is an 8-year-old girl named Kaitlyn, who is one of those rare people lucky enough to have had two heart transplants.

"I can tell that you are very smart because you have learned to do a lot of really cool things," she wrote to Joe in a letter. "I can also tell that you have a big heart and it's full of love for the family that takes care of you. I think it is awesome that you let kids with special needs ride on you and that you are very careful with them... You are like me because we both have had a chance to have a better life."

"Someone once told us, 'He has a kind spirit because he helps people,'" said Purcelli. "He's giving back after so many years of running wild."

The handsome horse is classic mustang, said Ernie Purcelli.

"He's not too flashy, just a simple bay," he said.

Joe began his journey with the Fox Lake Herd in the desert of Nevada and was adopted by the BLM as part of the Wild Horse Project. The Wahl Corporation brought Nevada Joe to its equestrian center and trained him. Horse enthusiasts followed Joe's progress for 12 consecutive months in the pages of Horse Illustrated magazine in 2002. Since leaving the Wahl Equestrian Center, Joe has experienced numerous equine disciplines and has been keeping Ernie and Diane busy training him for new events. In 2003 was featured at the Dodge World Toughest Rodeos where barrel racing caught his eye, so he participated in a Sharon Camarillo Clinic at Black Hawk College in Illinois. Next he found cowboy-mounted shooting a new challenge and entered the CMSA Nationals in Mississippi with Diane in the rifle competition. He also entered the ladies 1 Division and won reserve champion. Last November, Ernie and Joe competed and placed at the Arizona State Finals Mounted Shooting Competition.

Joe also participates in trick riding. Over the summer, Joe got involved with the Montana Junior Rodeo circuit and competed in Goat Tying, winning third place at the end of the season. Now, Joe resides at the Shooting Star Ranch as a therapeutic riding horse and was named the 2006 Ambassador for NRHA.

This year, Joe was instrumental in developing the first-ever Cowboy Mounted Shooting Association Therapeutic Shootout, which took place this June in Tunica, Miss.

"We contacted CMSA and Ernie developed the shootout for students with his Special Olympics class," Purcelli said. "The shootout focuses on the same skills as a shootout with guns, and develops hand-eye coordination using dowel rods and balloons."

At the therapeutic shootout, 15 students had the opportunity to ride Joe, and the event was covered by CBS News. Joe also is participating in a muscular dystrophy camp next year in Havre.

"He's one of the most trusted horses I'd take out of the barn," Purcelli said. "He's very intelligent. I think it's because mustangs learn to be a horse. They fend for themselves and take care of themselves. Now, if I show Joe something once, he does it."

Joe's wild side also helps him to adapt easily to unfamiliar situations. A shootout Joe participated in this year was in a giant corn maze on an elk farm.

"All the horses freaked out when they saw the elk," said Ernie. "But Joe backed out of the trailer, took one disinterested look at them and then turned his back to them. He's used to other animals."

Joe's animal friends at the ranch are Doc Holiday, a miniature horse, and Kid Boscoe, a border collie. Doc Holiday gives very sweet kisses to those who will lower themselves to his eye level, and Kid Boscoe likes to ride Doc Holiday around and do tricks. Most important though, are Joe's people friends.

"Alex counts the days of the week to his lessons," said his mom Danielle Fridley. "He couldn't keep track of the days of the week before this."

"Ernie, Diane and Pat are firm when they need to be, and very caring and loving. They care about what they're doing. I've never felt more at home. Alex just loves it, he adores it. A lot of these children get excluded from sports at school, and this was his first sport. He's doing very, very well. If the Purcellis are out of town, Alex will say, 'When are they getting back?' He's changed so much since he's been coming here."

Regardless of whether or not you're a horse lover, the warmth and friendliness at the Shooting Star Ranch encompass you as soon as you walk through the barn door. The kind eyes of Diane, the camaraderie Pat shares with the animals, the enthusiasm Ernie shows for the students, the loving hugs of Kid Boscoe, the sweet kisses of Doc Holiday and the gentle and thoughtful intelligence of their mascot, Nevada Joe, make up a truly unique and heartwarming experience that stays in the memories of all they have touched.

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