

Hippotherapy Works Wonders Among Area Youth

BY KAREN BERGER
MIRROR REPORTER

“Tell Dusty to ‘whoa,’” Tracey Lewis calls to 7-year-old Grace Giannini, who is perched atop a gentle Appaloosa.

Riding around on the 15-year-old horse, Grace isn’t just fulfilling a typical girlhood dream.

Instead, the Waterville first-grader is one of several area children benefiting from the St. Vincent Mercy Children’s Hospital hippotherapy program – the only one of its kind in Northwest Ohio.

Hippotherapy, which comes from the Greek word “hippos,” meaning horse, utilizes the movement of the horse, whose human-like gait pattern has been shown to improve the gait of the riders who participate.

The therapy also helps with sensory processing, and visual, auditory and movement senses.

Hippotherapy is different from therapeutic riding, in which a riding instructor teaches children and adults with disabilities how to ride, said Lewis, a physical therapist. Hippotherapy is provided by a licensed therapist who has specific goals. Riders also sit on pads rather than saddles, in order to feel the horse’s movements, she said.

While engaging her core muscles to stay on the horse, Grace performs a series of exercises – a ring toss, band stretch, Simon Says, ball toss and sitting backwards – all designed to strengthen her muscles, improve coordination and reach her goals.



Grace Giannini, a 7-year-old who has poor muscle tone due to a chromosome deletion, strengthens her core muscles, enhances her coordination and boosts her confidence through the St. Vincent Mercy Children’s Hospital hippotherapy program. She is pictured with Patty Wolff, co-owner of Timberwolff Stables.

Children with autism, Down syndrome, muscular dystrophy, traumatic brain injury or those who are weak from chemotherapy can benefit from hippotherapy, Lewis said.

Due to a genetic chromosome deletion, Grace was born with poor muscle tone. While Grace has been in physical, speech and other therapy since age 2, the most remarkable changes have occurred in the year since starting the hippotherapy, said her mother Mary.

“I’ve seen a dramatic improvement in her coordination, her climbing abilities and especially her confidence level,” Mary said.

Just staying on the horse requires a lot of muscle strength for Grace, and the first-grader is aided by several volunteers who ensure that she stays on Dusty while Lewis focuses on improving Grace’s core strength, balance, coordination and sequencing movements.

The program utilizes three area stables, two near Michigan and one in Whitehouse. Tom and Patty Wolff own the Berridge Road Timberwolff Stables.

Daughters Jordan and Whitney are teenagers and weren’t as involved in riding when Lewis approached the Wolffs three years ago, asking about hosting the riding lessons.

Now, in addition to helping care for the horses, the teens serve as walkers.

“They see how much it helps the kids,” Tom said. “The kids come alive when they’re out there.”

Patty taught learning-disabled children and those with behavioral disabilities for 30 years with Toledo Public Schools and became a certified therapeutic riding instructor, which is required on site at all times.

Like the Gianninis, most families find out about the

program through word of mouth, then ask a doctor for a referral. Some arrive in wheelchairs, and others can barely sit up. But many have told Lewis that after

one 10-week session, the improvement in function is incredible, she said.

For more information about the program, call (419) 251-0070.

St. Vincent’s Hippotherapy Program Needs To Raise \$40,000 To Survive

The St. Vincent Mercy Children’s Hospital hippotherapy program needs \$40,000 to continue serving area children. This is the amount it lost after grant funding was cut, according to physical therapist Tracey Lewis.

The number of children being served has dropped to five because of the funding cuts, Lewis said.

The Anthony Wayne Youth Foundation has teamed up with the program to raise funds, which will go toward serving children from Holland, Springfield Township, Maumee, Swanton and the Anthony Wayne area.

“We want to reach out to the kids in the area who need help and break out of the sports-only focus that we have now,” AWYF president Todd Frenndt said.

Online credit card donations can be made at www.awcommunity.com.

For more information on the program, go to www.timberwolffstables.com.



Carolyn Giannini, Grace’s sister, pets Dusty as physical therapist Tracey Lewis looks on. MIRROR PHOTOS BY KAREN BERGER

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