

HorseBuds Therapeutic Riding Center gives children a chance to learn through contact with animals

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Rowan Lewis, 5, paints Roxy, a miniature donkey, at HorseBuds Therapeutic Riding Center outside Greeley on Monday morning. Deb Michael, the founder of the riding center, said painting animals is sometimes the only way a child will interact with them when they first start coming to therapy sessions. The activity helps children relax, Michael said, which helps those with special needs work on other skills, like speech, while they are having fun. (Emily Wenger/ewenger@greeleytribune.com)

Deb Michael remembers one little boy who was afraid of all the 40 animals that lived at HorseBuds Therapeutic Riding Center (<http://www.greeleytribune.com/news/local/on-the-backs-of-angels-horses-and-other-farm-animals-help-open-worlds-to-kids-with-emotional-disabilities/>) when he first came to a therapy session.

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Horse Buds Therapy Riding Center is located just outside of Greeley, and still has some room in summer group Horse Boys classes. For more information, go to <http://www.horsebudstrc.org> (<http://www.horsebudstrc.org>) or email horsebuds.deb@gmail.com (<mailto:horsebuds.deb@gmail.com>).

He wouldn't go near them, she said, and was even afraid of her cat when it was 20 feet away. But Michael, who founded the riding center, didn't give up. She began to learn more about the boy, and when she realized he liked science, she would organize science projects near the animals, to help him become accustomed to their

presence. Then, when she saw him drawing in the sand while he was working on a volcano project, she had an idea.

"I said 'Do you want to paint a donkey?' and he said 'Sure, do you have paper?' " Michael said. "I said 'No, but I have a donkey.' "

So the boy painted the donkey — it was the first time he'd ever touched an animal — that day.

It's success stories like his that help keep Michael going as she runs the programs at the center, which focus on helping children and adults through contact with animals.



Emmi Carlson, a sophomore at Windsor High School and a volunteer at HorseBuds Therapeutic Riding Center, feeds Curly a treat after the horse performed tricks for children Monday morning, including using his nose to play an electric piano. (Emily Wenger/ewenger@greeleytribune.com)

Monday, several children gathered in Michael's barn to paint Roxy, a mini donkey, and Mojo, a mini horse. That activity, and others like riding horses and holding rabbits, Michael said, can help children with special needs relax and develop other skills they may be struggling with, like speech.

She and other staff at the center have extensive training in therapy, Michael said, and she's seen the results of their efforts since she started the center in 2013. She still has some clients who were with the program when it first started.

Staff and volunteers also enjoy the environment on the farm. Emmi Carlson, a sophomore at Windsor High School, said she's been volunteering at the center for a couple weeks, and while she enjoys helping the kids that come through the center, working with the animals is almost like therapy for her, too.



Angel, one of the therapy dogs at HorseBuds Therapeutic Riding Center, takes a break after spending time with the children at Monday morning's group therapy class.
(Emily Wenger/ewenger@greeleytribune.com)

"It's calming to work with animals," she said.

Since she founded the center, Michael has added staff members. She hopes they will help ensure that even if Michael can't always run it, the center will be around for the community for many years to come.

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