

MGH ARENA

A special way of reaching children

Story by **Jonathan Grass**

“Go!” is a word that can mean a lot to a child who has spent a lifetime in silence. Sitting up straight is a major accomplishment when a child is blind and not accustomed to lifting his or her head or one who’s deaf and has balance problems.

Yet such youngsters have been given the opportunities to find inner strengths through the help of some large, four-legged friends and a family who has put their heart and soul into bringing them together.

The Marianna Greene Henry Special Equestrian Center is indeed a special place to countless disabled children who come to Talladega to learn to build their lives. The 39,000-square-foot horse track offers various horseback riding programs to give disabled children much-needed therapies that a regular class or therapy room simply can’t provide.

This is a private foundation that strictly caters to students at Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind. Several of the staff and therapists are from AIDB. Marianna Greene Henry Special Equestrian Center is one of the largest therapeutic riding facilities in the country and offers these therapies to AIDB students at no charge.

Therapies range from physical to occupational to speech and beyond. Blind children learn posture and interaction. Deaf children can improve their balance. There are countless benefits the place gives children with these and other physical disabilities. Children that can’t physically ride a horse even get therapy through activities like grooming and feeding the horses.

Tim Greene, Arena coordinator, said he’s seen great changes in students’ communication, physical abilities, attention spans and muscle tone.

“It’s not like sports, it’s therapy,” he said. “Each child has medical plans and goals as part of the therapy.”

There’s also a physiological advantage to the equestrian activities.

It gives them confidence most of the kids never knew they had. They also learn bonding when many are uncommunicative before starting sessions there. Despite its being work, one

can’t undervalue the fun that the experience with the animals is.

The facility was founded by Pat and Marilyn Greene in memory of their daughter, Marianna. Tim is Marianna’s brother. The entire family takes pride in keeping the facility up to what she would have been proud of.

“We serve the largest number of sensory impaired people for our size in the country,” Tim said.

All of Marianna Greene Henry Special Equestrian instructors and barn staff are registered with the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association. The staff also relies on volunteer help and is always on the lookout for more.

“Our volunteers are what make this place go,” Tim said. The arena is always looking for new volunteers, and the only requirement is the desire to help the students.

One of the Marianna Greene Henry Special Equestrian Centers’ specialties is hippotherapy, which gets its name from the Greek word “hippos,” meaning horse.

This therapy uses the movement of the horse to help the children learn to improve movement, gross motor skills and trunk control.

Hippotherapy at the Arena is always supervised by a licensed occupational therapist or physical therapist.

The arena also has equine facilitated psychotherapy. In this, the students work on counseling or psychological goals using the horse as an equine partner.

Elizabeth Stanley, lead instructor at the arena, said many children are vastly more communicative with the aid of their steeds. Students can also do other standard therapeutic riding to learn basic riding skills to help their physical well-being.

The Arena program does not offer recreational riding, choosing to focus all of its resources on helping children who really need them.

The center’s Awakenings program is a subsidiary of the Helen Keller School at AIDB. It allows those individuals who have severe or multiple disabilities and need constant care a chance to ride, too.

The arena also hosts a rider’s club, where selected students practice three days a week to compete with other schools.

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MGH ARENA



Marianna Greene Henry Special Equestrians Center

The club has competed in many events throughout the years, including the Special Olympics at Troy University. In April, the arena also hosts its Riders With Disabilities Horse Show, in which AIDB riders and those from other therapeutic riding centers show what they can do. And the students always finish these competitions with awards to show for them.

All of these therapeutic riding programs are wonderful, yet would mean little if a child is unable to physically mount a horse. "Getting on and off the horse is the biggest safety risk," Tim said. Some children can struggle too much, while others may not move enough to safely mount a horse. Wheelchairs and other weight issues can also present obstacles.

The Greens were able to tackle that problem with the August unveiling of the Marianna Greene Henry Arena's new SureHands lift system. This is a device that fits under a person's arms and legs, whether they require a wheelchair or not, and

lifts them via motor while assistants manually maneuver the rider over the horse and lower them safely onto it.

Ellen Davis, an occupational therapist for AIDB who works with Marianna Greene Henry Special Equestrians, said the system is invaluable because manually lifting some of the children was too dangerous for both the students and the instructors. Therefore, some kids who could never ride before will now get their chance.

"It's a special feeling because so many needed hippotherapy, and we just couldn't get them on the horse," Davis said.

Davis said the system is incredibly safe and easy. She also noted that the motor is extremely quiet and does not disturb either the children or the horses.

Tim first learned about SureHands lifts about two years ago. He saw it as a perfect opportunity to allow more children to receive the benefits of hippotherapy and equine facilitated

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psychotherapy. He researched the system and consulted with Davis, who had worked with human lift systems before, and found it to be a smart choice for the Talladega center.

Davis said the children she's worked with have always had a similar sentiment. She said they enjoy being in the lift and even find it can be less intrusive for getting them onto their mounts. Plus, they think being pulled into the air is a lot of fun.

The \$10,000 lift system was made possible through an initial \$3,000 donation by Honda Manufacturing of Alabama. Jim and Marcella Bennett, who were friends with Marianna, toured the facility for the first time and were so impressed they wrote a check for the balance. Specialties Manufacturing in Talladega donated all of the steel used to build the system.

The SureHands lift is only the latest area that the Greens have used to keep their arena the best it can be for the students. Only last year, they installed a new roof to ensure maximum weather protection, and 2009 will also be the first year that an AIDB speech therapist's primary station will be at the Marianna Greene Henry Arena.

There is also the Ability Room, which is a horse-themed physical therapy room, where kids have more fun doing exercises because of the theme.

These improvements are all part of the Greens' mission to allow every AIDB student who needs it to benefit from riding. Children have come to the area from AIDB as young as 4 years old in the past. However, the average age for many of them tends to run in the 10 to 15 year old range.

Disabilities and accidents have no age limits, and the Greens realize it.

AIDB's E.H. Gentry facility, a full-service rehabilitation center for people with disabilities, uses the horses to accomplish its therapeutic goals. Although it's not often, the arena has had riders in their 50s and 60s in the past, and those riders benefited just as much as the children.

This whole equestrian program stemmed from the heart of the Greens' beloved daughter, Marianna, who always had two great passions in life — horses and helping children. This passion really took root when she assisted her brother, Michael, with helping children at a summer camp, some of whom were disabled.

She took that passion further in life by enrolling in the University of North Alabama to study special education. While in school, she met and married student Jim Henry in 1979. She successfully managed her family life with time for her goal of helping children who needed her. She volunteered at a therapeutic riding program in Birmingham, where she was amazed at the difference horses can make to the disabled.

Marianna took the next step by convincing her parents to

open a small therapeutic riding facility for hippotherapy on their Talladega property, which was near AIDB.

"She took me to watch horses and meetings and said, 'You have the land and disabled kids nearby. I want you to start one,'" Pat said.

Sadly, it turned out Marianna had a malfunctioning heart, and this would prevent her from seeing what her passion would ultimately become. She was diagnosed with cardiomyopathy and passed away in 1989 at the age of 31.

It wasn't long before the Greens were able to honor their daughter's wish and initiated a pilot therapeutic riding program on their outdoor property. This started with eight students from the Helen Keller School. Marianna's own horse, Solomon, along with two others were the first ones used in pilot program.

"It needed to be more than a backyard thing. We built it up and made it sheltered, and it really took off," Tim said. Indeed it did. Thanks to grants and donors, not to mention incredible results for the students, the Marianna Greene Henry Special Equestrian Arena became a fully-functional therapeutic facility and was dedicated in 1994.

Since its beginnings, it has grown in size, capabilities and reputation.

The arena now covers a large area, keeps an average of 15 horses per year and serves anywhere from 350 to 400 children annually.

It has become a nationally known facility and has even been featured in the magazines *People* and *Biography*.

Tim said he gets inquiries and visitors from all across the country.

While they're glad that the center is so recognized, Pat and Marily said the priority will always be the children.

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