

VOLUNTEER

By Debbie Griffith

I've loved horses all my life. About a year ago, I heard about a barn where there was a program that I could possibly volunteer at and get some riding time. I would do anything for a chance to ride, even muck stalls. As far as I was concerned, the only thing that would make me happy would be the ability to ride. I thought riding was all I wanted out of my volunteer experience. My way of thinking has changed forever.

I got the phone number and name of the person running the program at the barn. I called to schedule a time for me to come out and see what this program was. I spoke to Stephanie, who runs the program. She told me she could use more volunteers in her program, and we agreed that I would come the following Wednesday.

Finally, the week rolled around to Wednesday and I went straight to the barn from work. It was not very easy to find - there seemed to be a dozen farms on this road. After two or three passes up and down the road, I finally spotted a small brown sign with yellow lettering hanging on a mailbox. The sign had the initials MTEHC Therapeutic Riding on it. Since it was late October, it was already getting dark. I saw an outside light by one of the many buildings, and that is where I headed. There was another of the little brown signs by the door. When I entered the building, the room resembled a living room. There were two couches, and several horse pictures on the walls. There was a woman sitting on the couch reading a magazine. I could smell the hay and horse scent all around me. On a table in one corner, there were riding helmets, with more hanging on pegs above the table. I asked the woman which door led to the horse arena and she told me to go in the door next to the table of helmets.

I took a deep breath and went through the door, the air was much cooler in the barn/arena. On my right was the arena with a garage type door that was open with a closed swing gate and to the left were stalls. At the gate for the arena, I stopped to watch what was going on. There was a child on a large horse that was white with gray specks. There were two adults, one on each side of the child, and another one leading the horse. The woman introduced herself as Stephanie. She greeted me warmly, and asked me to come on in and meet little Steph. As I approached the horse, Stephanie introduced me to little Steph. She was a really cute little girl about seven years old. The horses' name was Goodie.

Stephanie instructed me on how to hold on to little Steph, with my left arm over her right leg and holding on to the surcingle (a device with a handle for kids to hold onto instead of using a saddle). Goodie was tall and I had a hard time keeping up when little Steph gave the command for the horse to "Walk On". Anyone watching the horse would think she was walking at a snail's pace, but the six to eight inches of sand that I was walking in made it seem like we were running a marathon. Before we made it one time around the arena, my breathing was labored, and I was sweating! Little Steph did not talk a lot when I first met her, but she always had a smile on her face.

I have been a steady volunteer at the barn for a little over a year now. After a few sessions with little Steph, my thoughts no longer are centered on my being able to ride and I have not ridden there once. One night each week, I have the opportunity and pleasure to touch a child's life in some way. In the past year, I have seen little Steph progress in so many ways. Her speech is improving along with my ability to make it around the arena and still be able to talk and breathe. It makes you realize how fortunate you are in your own life. I thought the only thing that would make me happy was to be able to ride, but working with little Steph and the horses has far surpassed what I thought I wanted and needed; the riding. Now little Steph and I share smiles as we work in the arena with Goodie.