

April 24, 2018

To Whom It May Concern,

Today is definitely one of those days that makes teaching worthwhile! Sometimes we get so caught up with the daily rules, regulations, schedules, paperwork, etc. that comes along with this profession we sometimes miss sight of the “real picture.”

Several weeks ago I was contacted by a representative from the Georgetown Hugs for Horses program. I was told that money was available for a one time trip to the Georgetown Equestrian Center for students diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder. I immediately jumped at the thought of this experience for my students but in the back of my mind I was cautiously skeptical.

All of the students in my program are non-verbal or functionally non-verbal and have significant sensory and behavioral issues. I knew that most of them would be wary of going to the barn in general, much less getting “up close and personal” with the horses. Nevertheless, I knew exposing them to a new environment would be a positive experience. WOW! What an understatement that ended up being!

When we arrived at the Equestrian Center and exited the bus, most of my students began exhibiting self-stimulation behaviors, as they generally do in a new environment. New experiences and changes to their daily routine can be a challenge.

For the first 45 minutes Mrs. Rona took our class around the barn, allowing my students to see and touch numerous animals that live there. We saw miniature horses, a cow, chickens, goats, and dogs. As expected, most of my students were very overwhelmed and actually scared of the animals. Only a few would actually go near them. Most stood back and observed from afar. All the while Mrs. Rona and the entire group of volunteers remained incredibly patient and supportive.

Eventually the time came for them to enter the arena and actually ride. Now I have heard about Hugs for Horses for many years and the therapeutic advantages that the program provides. I even know several special needs students who ride with them on a regular basis. But, what happened next was beyond my wildest dreams.

We chose to start with a student who had not been afraid of the other barn animals and had shown interest in interaction with them. I walked up the platform steps with her and as we waited for the horse to come close enough for her to mount, her demeanor began to change. This particular student not only has Autism but also has Cerebral Palsy. Generally she exhibits extreme self-stimulation behaviors and rigid, spastic muscle movements. As soon as she mounted the horse her body relaxed and the involuntary movements stopped.

I followed her around the arena in total disbelief. It was as if she and the horse had some kind of understand with each other. She never tried to let go or get off of the horse. A huge smile stayed on her face the entire time she rode.

As the second horse entered the arena another student quickly hurried up the steps so she could ride. Time after time each student anxiously awaited their turn. By the end of the session EVERY single student in my class willingly mounted and rode a horse. All of the staff members who work with these students each day were in total disbelief. Students who were shaking and visibly scared to even enter the barn were enamored with the experience of riding.

While on the horses, we saw students exhibit behaviors that we had never seen before. One student, who is completely non-verbal, waved to us for the first time ever! Another student initiated verbal communication with the volunteers that were assisting him! A third student, who has a "shadow" assigned to him because of specific behavioral concerns, rode without exhibiting any inappropriate behaviors. Several students, who were initially scared to even touch the animals were verbally requesting to ride.

Right then and there I decided that this experience could not be "one and done!" I vowed to the other professionals that work in my classroom that I would find funding for our students to experience the Hugs for Horses program at The Georgetown Equestrian Center on a regular basis. At that point Mrs. Rona told

me that the program for an entire school year runs @ \$7,500, for once a week riding lessons.

It is for these incredible reasons that that I am humbly submitting a request for financial assistance. I whole heartedly believe that regular, weekly riding experiences would positively impact the lives of my students. Today I was able to witness the incredible therapeutic advantages that Hugs for Horses provides and hope that my students will be lucky enough to become a part of the program!