



RIDE WITH PRIDE: Children Gallop Through Disabilities

June 22, 2023 — WASHINGTON, Pa. — Four children with varying abilities graduated from the annual Easterseals Ride With Pride program on Thursday night, June 22, at Coventry Equestrian Center. Ride With Pride is a free, seven-week-long, equine-assisted program presented by Easterseals Rehabilitation Center in Wheeling.

The program is a hands-on, unique and engaging way to improve strength, posture, coordination, confidence, leadership, communication and more in children with physical and developmental disabilities.

Each child was awarded a medal, a certificate of completion and a gift bag as part of the graduation ceremony. They even had their very own graduation party to follow.

Dr. Ellen Kitts, Easterseals Medical Director, spoke on the improvements seen in each child throughout the course of the program. Kitts stated “there has been carry-over at home in addition to all the changes you have seen here, so this really does make a difference for everybody.”

Parents also noted their children not only improved on the horses, but they also gained skills in their home life. Owen and Bella’s mom, Kelli Shallcross of Bellaire, Ohio, stated “Owen’s balance and overall confidence has improved.” Owen, age 6, has gone through the program twice and his mother said this time around “he has gotten to develop leadership.” Shallcross also said the program “has helped with Bella’s language skills.” Days later, Bella, age 3, can remember her lessons and talk about the event and what she enjoyed.



During her closing remarks, Dr. Kitts said participant Aubree Reed, age 5, showed excitement throughout the program, telling her grandparents all about her experience. She also assumed more of a leadership role.

Maggie Zaliponi of Cranberry Township recognized her son Tristan's "strength and mobility are better in terms of balance." Zaliponi reminisced that the first time Tristan, age 11, rode a horse, it took him 40 minutes to get on and he struggled with the exercises, but now he gets on in two seconds and is capable of all the exercises. Dr. Kitts recognized Tristan's improvement in communication and socialization.

During the course of Ride With Pride, Lori Ulman, a certified therapeutic riding instructor, taught the kids riding posture, technique and commands. She then led them through exercises and activities to put these skills into practice. The activities ranged from galloping over logs, tossing a ball into a bucket, "parking" the horse and standing while riding. Bella said her favorite game was Park the Pony.

All of this would not be possible without the dedicated volunteers, who led the horses and stood alongside the participants throughout the program. Zaliponi recalled when the volunteers stayed overtime so Tristan could practice after she and her son were running late due to traffic. Both Zaliponi and Shallcross stated one of their favorite things about Ride With Pride was the kindness and support of the volunteers and how patient they were with the participants.

Volunteer Michelle Lippincott of Colerain, Ohio stated she chose to volunteer because "she loves helping the kids, seeing them smile and watching them improve." Lippincott also said "horses are a big part of my heart, and sharing a piece of my heart with the kids brings me joy."

Joy was evident on the faces of the children while riding and accomplishing their exercises.

Parents of participating children noted their kids would not have an opportunity like this without Easterseals, and it is a "great introduction to horseback riding for them" in a safe, inclusive and growing environment.

Ride With Pride will take place again at Coventry in the fall. Easterseals operates a second program for Parkersburg-area clients each summer. For more information or to volunteer, call Dr. Ellen Kitts, 304-242-3900.

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