

New ideas in brain injury therapy

by Peggy Helmick-Richardson

Allen High School's Health Occupation Students of America (HOSA) organization often invites guest speakers to deliver presentations to its members on their specific field of health care. What most HOSA members don't expect is for the guest's field to include coastal bermuda. This fall HOSA students were treated to a demonstration by registered quarter horses Hank and Trip, owned and

trained by Cindy Long, a certified brain injury specialist and residential program manager for Pate Rehabilitation in Anna. Pate devotes itself to brain injury rehabilitation.

Accompanied by Pate occupational therapist Emily Harstad and physical therapist Christie Schoel, Cindy put the two horses through their paces for the students, with Pate client volunteers assisting.

Hank, who has trained longer than Trip, demonstrated such exercises as the "yo-yo game" (walking back and forth), "sideways game" (stepping side to side) and "hide the hiney" (bending the rear end one side to the other) with the clients who are dealing with different impairments due to brain injuries.

"All of these games are played without the client touching the horse," Cindy points out. "Can you imagine how empowering that is, to get a horse to move without touching him?" In addition to responding to the slightest movement, Hank and Trip are trained to work with verbal commands from speech patients. "Shhh" will get them to back up, a kissing sound tells them to step forward, a tongue-click tells the horses to step sideways, and the traditional "whoa" means to stop. "I've also taught the horses that when a patient stops, the horse stops immediately," Cindy adds. "That way, if a patient loses their balance, the horse stops."

To offer HOSA students a better understanding of how and under what circumstances Hank and Trip could be of benefit to those dealing with brain injuries, the three clients shared details of their specific brain injuries before demonstrating the work they do with the horses.

Two of the Pate clients are in residential treatment at this time. Confined to a wheelchair, but now able to speak and stand with assistance, a severe whiplash caused by a single-car accident in 2009 left David paralyzed from the nose down. Initially he

was unable to move his limbs or torso or speak. For Cathy, difficulty in maintaining her balance was one of a number of side effects of the brain injury she experienced from a reaction to a prescribed medication.

Allen resident Rob Rinehart is an outpatient Pate client. A stroke in August he attributes to "workaholicism" left the 39-year-old without use of the right side of his body and unable to speak. Through rehabilitation therapy, today he can speak and walk with a cane. Sessions with Hank and Trip have proved to be a successful and fun aspect of his therapy. "It's a huge improvement in such a short amount of time," Rob adds.

Working with Hank, Rob and Cathy showed the HOSA students not only how easy working with the horse was, but also how fun. A simple up-and-down motion of the arm or a tilt of the head resulted in the horse moving in the wanted direction. For his portion of the HOSA demonstration, David approached Hank in his wheelchair. Then, while the unflappable horse stood perfectly still, David pulled himself to a standing position using a strap attached to Hank.

Employed with Pate for eight years, Cindy purchased Hank three years ago. "When I saw Hank's personality and intuitiveness, I knew this was the horse I had been looking for to do therapy work." Last year, Cindy bought Hank's older brother, Trip, because he demonstrated the same "kind, calm and quiet" spirit.

She explains that the initial training for therapy work required 18 to 20 hours a week for approximately six months. Today, in addition to working directly with Pate clients twice a week, Hank and Trip receive an additional five hours of training each week at Cindy's Blue Ridge farm. "I train horses using the way horses communicate with each other, and I think that makes a huge difference," Cindy comments.

Cindy explains that before Hank and Trip were allowed to work with Pate clients, they were trained with the assistance of staff members to be calm around wheelchairs, scooters, walkers and canes. As Pate patients improve physically, they may work with the horses on an obstacle course that includes cones, poles and pedestals. "It's like a dance," Cindy declares. "It is just beautiful!"

Working with horses since she was 12, Cindy is unaware of any other brain-injury facility that utilizes trained horses for the type of brain injury therapy she employs. "Most of the patients say it is the highlight of their week," Cindy states. "When I post the boys' schedule, everyone wants to be on it."

HOSA advisor, as well as the Principles of Health Science and Pharmacy Technician Program teacher,



Cindy Long with Trip and Hank

Stephanie Cook brought Cindy and Hank to Allen High School last school year for the first time. Student response was so enthusiastic they were invited to return again this year. Cindy and Stephanie met at a horse training facility and when the Allen High School teacher learned what Cindy did with Hank, she invited them to demonstrate their skills for HOSA students.

"It offers them something to think about," Stephanie explains. "Some of our students want to be therapists and this may be something they've never even thought about, because I had never seen it before."

HOSA advisor and Medical Terminology and Clinical Rotation teacher at Allen High School Kim Lane concurs. "It really brings to light different aspects of health care and gives them a real hands-on application."

As part of Diabetes Awareness Week (January 17-21), Allen High School's HOSA will host a Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation (JDRF) speaker on January 9. During the actual Diabetes Awareness Week, the 209 Allen High School HOSA members will be distributing information on diabetes at the school. To raise funds they will be selling cut out paper sneakers to be hung in the cafeteria window and diabetic-friendly snacks. At the conclusion of the week, HOSA hosts a JDRF walk in the AHS upstairs hall on Saturday, January 21, from 10 a.m. to noon. Raising money for the JDRF is this school year's national HOSA service project, and 10% of the funds collected from the local HOSA's efforts will go back to the AHS group. ❖

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Hank and Rob Rinehart