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## HEADS UP

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# WHAT'S UP AT HEADS UP?

Pet Me! Interviews Nancy Pitchford-Zhe

Story and photos by Tony Zinnanti

"Our horses are incredible leaders. They are very into their work. They are very perceptive," explains Nancy Pitchford-Zhe, the executive director of horse therapy program Heads Up. Nancy emanates compassion and order. Dressed in weathered boots, jeans and a Navajo print, she speaks like a modern day Mae West. She has survived broken bones and cancer and lets nothing stand between the day-to-day challenges of running a non-profit and the magic that occurs at Heads Up.

Heads Up, founded in 1986, offers therapy on horseback to those with special needs. All are welcome. Nancy and her volunteer staff have helped children as young as 18 months and seen some of those children grow into young adults transformed by their equestrian experience. But, there is more. The transformations happening at Heads Up reach court referred juveniles and adults, with a remarkable 40 percent opting to stay on as volunteers after their debt to society has been paid.



referral cases. "I know their hearts, and that's why they're with me," Nancy speaks of her volunteers. In fact, the volunteers are vital to the continuation of this program which runs on a slim budget of \$100,000 per year.

Bridging a generation gap, Nancy reverts the court referred youngsters to working the basics of manual labor. While there are certain cases she is unable to take, Nancy explains that "very few kids are turned away." Each referral is handed a list of rules which command responsibility and basic decency. Spitting, swearing and slouching are outlawed and a violation can quickly send the probationer back to their supervising officer. But, Nancy is a believer in positive reinforcement; the kind that these kids have likely never heard in the frequently troubled homes from which they come. All but a few of these kids find that they are able to rise to the occasion.

As a Heads Up volunteer progresses, they are trained to be a "side walker"; someone who walks with the special needs child while they are on horseback. "They become part of a team," Nancy observes. This progression and the relationship with a dependent person and animal proves to be a boost in self-esteem for those once lost in the quagmire of electronic distractions and a culture of faltering morality. The hard work is aimed at "revisiting the basics of responsibility and self-sufficiency." Nancy notes that a lot of the kids who first arrive, "don't know how to even hold a rake or a broom."

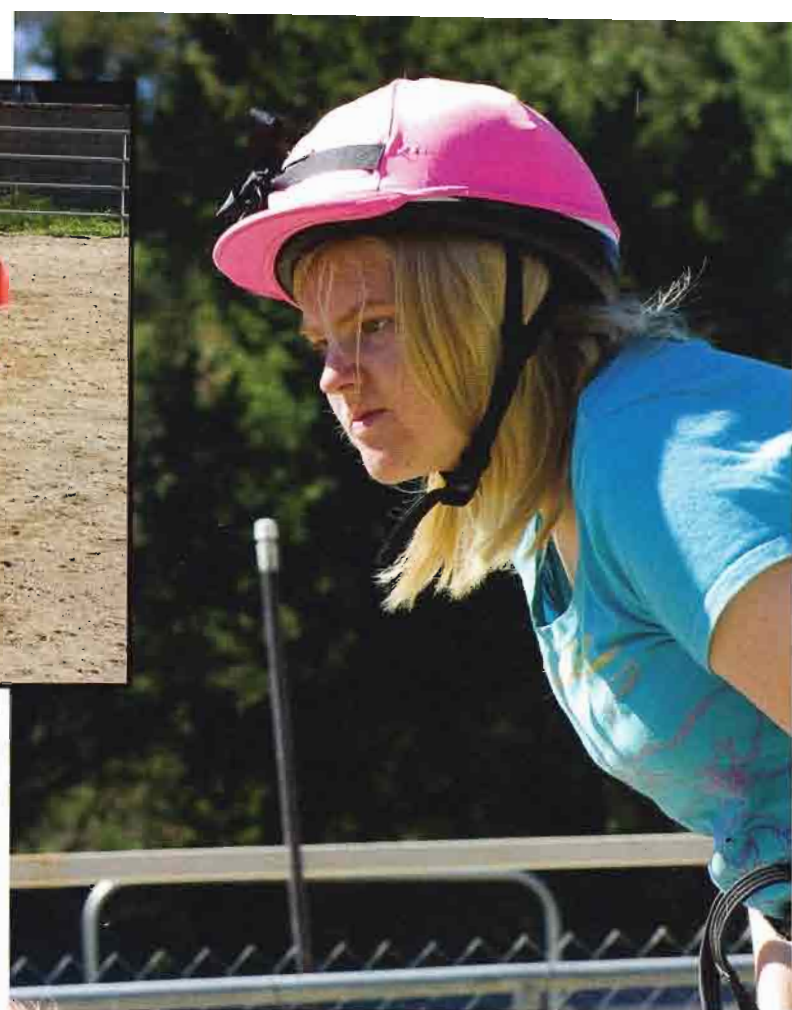
The union of the dedicated volunteer, the reformed and reforming is all geared toward the goal of fostering the development of those less fortunate; those afflicted with autism, cerebral palsy and other maladies giving rise to special needs. The Deputy Probation Officer, Richard Ralston, is a staunch advocate of Heads Up. Dealing with characteristically self-absorbed teens, Officer Ralston notes that working with animals and those with special needs "greatly expands their concept of themselves and other people."

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The volunteers round out a third group which supervises and directs, and to whom Nancy refers to as "a family." Instructor, Patti Paglia, and assistant instructor, Nancy Hillard, help to form a core of adult leaders supervising youth volunteers, riders and court



Heads Up requests a fee of \$30 per therapy session. If families are unable to afford that fee, Heads Up may assist to get scholarships and grants for program attendance.



The preferred age for starting children at Heads Up is three years of age. Nancy explains that, with certain afflictions, there is tremendous opportunity to give a child social training and motor skill development prior to entering kindergarten around the age of five. The relationship with the animal and being on horseback improves coordination and awareness. The team of side-walkers will have the child do simple tasks such as throwing a ball or tossing a ring. As the therapy progresses, the tasks become more comprehensive.

Ultimately, riders progress to English style riding; an art that requires the coordinated use of all four quadrants of the body, along with great finesse in communication with the horse. In the case of Veronica, a young teen rider with Heads Up, the relationship has progressed to total care and handling of the horse. Over the years, this has led to a drastic improvement with focus, communication and following instructions.

Heads Up boasts a perfect safety record. It's no surprise given the tight ship that Nancy runs. "I'm tough. These are the rules. There are no second chances," she explains. However, on this point, I think I disagree. Perhaps there are no second chances for those who fail to abide by ranch rules. But, here, there's as much compassion in the air as stable dust. Heads Up is clearly a place of second chances for those who society might otherwise cast aside. 🐾

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