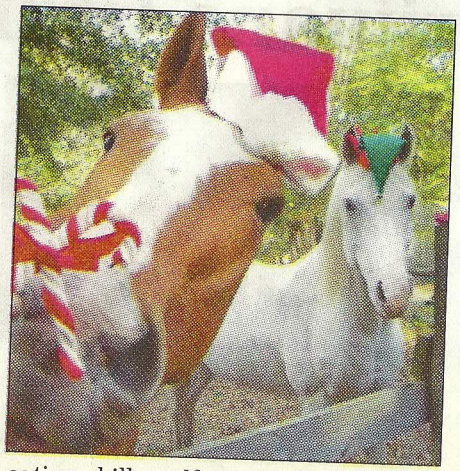
Ho, Ho, Horses!!

Anthony D. Rabak, Alta Sierra Resident Writer

In 2000, while Valerie and I were living in Elk Grove, I finally got a confirmed name for the strange neurological sensations I'd been experiencing: RRMS, a disorder called Relapsing Remitting Multiple Sclerosis. I was looking for ways to deal with my new medical acquisition and I learned about equine therapy. Turns out horse riding is something beneficial when dealing with a disability. Enjoyable therapy? I had to learn more. Why a horse? These majestic creatures, being a dynamic living animal, provide a unique multi-sensory means of therapy; the shape of their backs provides a perfect platform. Their pelvis is like ours in that it has a three-dimensional movement (up, down, and side to side). Their gait simulates our walking and the repetitive motion helps a rider improve muscle tone, strength, posture, flexibility and balance. A horse's natural rhythm gently moves muscles and the spine. Sitting on a horse can stretch hip joints reducing pain and spasticity in the legs. Many restricted to wheelchairs, braces or crutches can feel mobile again when riding a horse. On the outside you may just see a body riding a horse, inside it's actually a spirit soaring.

Besides physical benefit, horse riding improves social & communication skills, self-esteem, self-awareness and self-achievement. I weigh 115 pounds with two weak legs, yet I successfully control an 1100 pound animal with four strong ones. An empowering, goal-oriented and enjoyable therapy. Trained instructors, needed volunteers and, of course, the horses all make this possible.



After diagnosis I found a local program, but they had a long waiting list. It was two years before I received my call offering a riding spot. Unfortunately, it came when packing the last boxes to start our new life in Grass Valley. Once we moved, I was blessed to find an organization that answered my prayers to ride: Horses for Healing. I rode a couple of years before I had a paralyzing MS setback that kept me out of the saddle for a year. Fortunately, with physical therapy and faith I regained my ability to walk with crutches. Over the last 2 years I'm riding tall again! (When you're under 5'2" that's a "big" thing!

Some believe angels have two wings, I've learned that some have four legs. Merry Christmas everyone!

"There is something about the outside of the horse that is good for the inside of man."

— Teddy Roosevelt

This is especially true of the benefits of therapeutic riding for children and adults with special needs, the disabled, the autistic, as well as troubled teens.

Horses for Healing is a therapeutic riding center in north Auburn serving the community since 1997. They provide safe and effective equine-assisted activities and therapies for individuals with special needs. Patients with cancer, cerebral palsy, depression, Down syndrome, learning disabilities, multiple sclerosis, spina bifida, spinal cord injuries, head injuries, Attention Deficit Disorder, stroke, visual impairments and other ailments, even amputees, have been benefited by therapeutic horseback riding. www.horsesforhealing.org (530) 887-9573