



MYKAL MCELLOWNEY/STAFF

Wyatt Reeves, 11, is led around on a horse by a volunteer at Let's Saddle Up during a therapeutic horsemanship class in Fountain Inn.



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Let's Saddle Up owner Sharron Dillard, right, with student Wyatt Reeves and miniature horse Tater Tot on Thursday.

Let's Saddle Up provides equine therapy for those of all ages in need

By Scott Keeler
Staff Writer
dskeeler@greenvillenews.com

It's the end of another work day at Solid Rock Stables in Fountain Inn and Sharron Dillard finds herself in a familiar position.

After spending much of the day on her feet, she slinks down into a rocking chair on the front porch of a barn. While a bird chirps and the old chair gently rocks against the old wooden floor, the only other occasional sound is that of a horse's hooves hitting the dirt as a young girl guides it past to a training area.

Starting out at the pastures and trees of the 200-acre complex, a smile ap-

pears on Dillard's face. "This is my favorite place out here," Dillard says. "It's very head-clearing."

The gleam in her eyes confirms that thought. It has little to do with the satisfaction of being done for the day though. Instead, it has everything to do with the satisfaction in Dillard knowing that she's spent another day doing exactly what she was meant to do.

As the owner of Let's Saddle Up, Dillard provides equine-assisted activities and therapies for those in need. After spending most of her professional life as a registered nurse, Dillard started pursuing her current career five years ago after read-

ing about a program in England where horses were being used to help people.

Dillard is one of 850 worldwide certified instructors in the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International. After also earning her certification in equine therapy, Dillard opened Let's Saddle Up in May of 2012.

Having outgrown its first two locations, the non-profit company landed at Solid Rock Stables in January of 2014.

"I always wanted it to be a non-profit, because to me the community owns a non-profit and I wanted to give back," Dillard said. "Our mission statement is 'saddle up and follow your dream,' and we see that every day we come to lessons."

Five lessons

What Dillard sees in those every-day lessons are people of all ages with various needs.

Dillard uses eight horses and a group of trained volunteers to offer five programs. All five programs have special paperwork and some require a physician's approval.

The Therapeutic Riding program is for special needs children and adults, while the Silver Stirrups program is for those ages 50 and over. The Eagles program is for veterans suffering from PTSD and it's offered free of charge.

"They've given so much for us, I don't want to charge them," Dillard said.

During riding time, which varies by lessons, Dillard will instruct while one volunteer walks in front of the horse with other volunteers walk on either side of the horse.

Therapeutic Driving offers those unable to ride

the horses a chance to learn how to guide horses while walking behind them or "driving a cart" as Dillard calls it.

"This helps teach concentration and focus," Dillard said.

The Horse Therapy program features Tater Tot, a 29-inch tall miniature horse, visiting nursing homes, schools and assisted living centers.

"Tater Tot is our public relations director," Dillard said with a smile. "He can go in the house and climb stairs and watch TV."

While Tater Tot is too small to ride, he's been a valuable part of therapy.

"Horses are drawn to pain - physical or emotional," Dillard said. "When we visit a nursing home, Tater Tot will go straight to someone who's suffered a loss in their family or had surgery. He will go close his eyes and nuzzle with them, allowing them to pet him."

Blueberry Muffin is Let's Saddle Up's other miniature horse. At 36 inches tall, she can only accommodate young children riders, so most of her work comes in the Therapeutic Driving program.

Dillard is amazed by what she's witnessed in the programs. She's seen an autistic child speak his first words while saddled up on a horse. A young woman who suffered a brain injury came and regained her strength and now has a job to support herself. Dillard said she's also seen retirees ride for the first time in their life and do well.

"A lot of people who come up just want to brush the horses," Dillard said. "That's their therapeutic thing."

Dillard recalls a particularly emotional day at the



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Wyatt Reeves, 11, is helped onto a horse by volunteers and Let's Saddle Up owner Sharron Dillard, middle right, during a therapeutic horsemanship class in Fountain Inn.

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