

MARTIN COUNTY

Equine, music therapy in Palm City aims to help abused, autistic and mentally ill children

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"Walk on," 8-year-old Gabriel Scoboria says to Harmony, a mini chestnut horse at Harmony Hope Stables in Palm City.

Gabriel leads the horse through an obstacle course, weaving in and out of colorful cones, circling around large bins and jumping over hurdles. It's Gabriel's responsibility to direct Harmony and keep her on track until they're through the course.

For about a year, Gabriel has been taking equine assisted learning sessions with Kristi Huddleston, who founded Harmony Hope Stables' equine and music therapy program for children who have autism, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), depression, anxiety or have been victims of abuse.

Though high-functioning on the autism spectrum, Gabriel struggles with anxiety, self-confidence and staying focused, said his mother, Angelique Scoboria.

It wasn't until he began equine lessons that his family saw improvements in his self-esteem and school performance, she said.

The difference in Gabriel is night and day, Huddleston said. He now walks tall, can strike up a conversation with anyone and knows how to calm himself.

"Once you remove them from school or traditional therapy, it gives them the opportunity to express more emotions," said Huddleston, who is not a licensed therapist herself but collaborates with mental health professionals.

Equine and music therapy

The nonprofit Harmony Hope Stables is the only Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship (PATH) program in Martin County for children ages 7 to 18.

Equine psychotherapy, commonly called horse therapy, uses the animal as a medium to observe a patient's behavioral patterns, thought processes and emotions.

Activities such as grooming, feeding, haltering and riding a horse not only provide a more comfortable environment for children to speak about their experiences, it also instills the importance

of responsibility, problem-solving, self-control and anger management.

"For whatever reason, when they're here, they just open," said Huddleston. "It's much easier for them to talk about their struggles or trauma."

Half-sister mini horses Harmony and Melody — distinguishable by the respective heart and music note shaved on their backs — and 26-year-old retired racing horse Rio are used throughout the session.

The added combination of music therapy is unique, she added. Both provide an avenue of communication to discuss sensitive topics and behavior observation, but the two are not often used in unison.

Using both processes is particularly beneficial for children on the autism spectrum, who have difficulties with sound, touch, communication and socializing.

Hearing a guitar being played or feeling the rough rope of a horse's harness are common obstacles that Huddleston helps these children overcome, she said.

A passion project

Huddleston bought Harmony Hope Staples in April and began accepting students later that summer. She already was a certified PATH instructor for about two years and doing sessions at the Equine Rescue and Adoption Foundation in Palm City.

But opening Harmony Hope Stables has been a dream in the works for decades.

Having to overcome childhood post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) herself, Huddleston said she knew the benefits of both music and equine therapy and was compelled to combine the two at her 5-acre ranch.

"If it weren't for horses and music, I wouldn't be standing here today," she said.

The 5-acre ranch is still a work in progress, Huddleston added. She plans to have a music center, recording studio, sensory riding trails and a reading/art therapy loft.

Eight children are now enrolled in Huddleston's therapy sessions, in addition to working with Hibiscus Children's Center in Jensen Beach.

Though families can pay privately, many are on scholarships because of the high costs of therapy and maintaining horses.

Three packages are offered: Music with the Minis, Harmony and Horses, and Stable Moments. Prices fluctuate but can range from \$225 for a group session of eight to a \$5,750 annual membership with a weekly session.

Community involvement

Adults throughout the community can volunteer for as little as one hour a week to mentor a child through the ranch's Stable Moments program, Huddleston said.

Volunteers must undergo a four-week training program to learn about basic horsemanship skills and how to handle children dealing with trauma.

Donations are always needed for ground projects and to fund therapy sessions.

Groundbreaking ceremony

What: Martin County Chamber of Commerce will host the event, with food, music and a demonstration of the mini horse obstacle course

When: Noon March 5

Where: Harmony Hope Stables, 5010 69th St., Palm City

Registration: Required at [hhstables2020.eventbrite.com](https://www.eventbrite.com/e/hhstables2020-tickets-54848481247).

Catie Wegman is a community reporter who also produces "Ask Catie," an occasional feature to find answers to your burning questions about anything and everything — the more bizarre the better. Support her work with a TCPalm subscription. Contact her at catie.wegman@tcpalm.com or 772-221-4211 and follow her @Catie_Wegman on Twitter and @catiewegman1 on Facebook.