

Standing Tall and Proud

Aliyah Zeitler is thankful and blessed to be able to ride at Exceptional Equestrians. The smart and confident 13-year-old has been riding at Exceptional Equestrians for as long as she can remember. It's been part of her weekly therapy for 11 years and has helped her allay some of the major challenges she faces having cerebral palsy and autism.

CP causes spasticity and shortening of the hamstrings and heel cord muscles, making them painfully tight and hard to move. Hippotherapy stretches her legs and helps her build core strength.

"It's remarkable the impact riding makes," said Aliyah's mother, Kristen. "And it helps her for days afterward. Without hippotherapy, Aliyah's life would be painful.

"It also gives her the experience of a fluid walking gait, which is very important for her to feel," she added. "The gait of the horse is the only therapy that can mimic the human gait. The spacial loss from CP can make her feel almost ungrounded.

"Autism makes Aliyah high strung," Kristen added. "Hippotherapy calms her. As a parent, I can see it happening as she rides. It's one of so many intangible benefits.

"Exceptional Equestrians is special. It provides something I haven't found anywhere else, week after week," Kristen explained. "I always encourage people to come and see what happens physically and mentally when she's on that horse. It's exciting. It's a little bit of magic.

"When Aliyah was first walking, around age 3, she would struggle to walk in,

using her little walker. She was bent over, swaying, and laboring. Then she would ride for a half hour, and afterwards she walked straight as an arrow," Kristen marveled. "The doctor said she would never walk. I feel this is a huge reason she does."

It's not surprising such a big part of her life would inspire Aliyah's creative writing.

"I wrote a book about Stella," Aliyah said. Stella is one of the therapy horses at Exceptional Equestrians. In Aliyah's story, Stella is a horse who turns back into her true form, a princess.

"Exceptional Equestrians is such a

blessing for me," said Aliyah, who is a 7th grader at Luxemburg-Casco Middle School. "It makes me feel happy to be with such great people. I'm thankful and proud to be part of this."

"The volunteers and therapists are her best cheerleaders," Kristen agreed. "She doesn't even realize she's working.

"Aliyah can't be in a lot of extra-curricular activities," Kristen added. "She likes being able to tell other kids she rides horseback."

Aliyah shared her essay, *A Challenge for You* in this issue of EE News. "I hope to inspire people to love themselves and love others around them," she said.



Aliyah at age 2 riding Masada in 2006 for hippotherapy with Lisa Kafka (left), and 13-year-old Aliyah joyfully riding Maverick in November (right).

How does Hippotherapy Influence Walking?

Walking, or gait, is a complex pattern of movement that gets us from one place to another. Our bodies are passengers on our lower limbs which consist of multiple joints and muscles. Did you know that selective control and modulation of 57 muscles in the lower limbs is required for controlled gait?

In addition to controlled muscle action, in order for us to walk in an efficient and coordinated manner, several additional prerequisites are required. We need range of motion in the soft tissue to allow the limb to move forward; we need alignment of the body segments to keep our center of mass over our base of support. We need strength in each muscle as it is required to activate and hold.

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We need mobility in the joints of the ankle and foot which provide a rocker to move the body forward and also provide shock absorption as we step.

All of these things happen within our musculo-skeletal system as we walk, and yet we are not conscious of them. The movements are automatic and efficient, unless we have a disruption in any of those prerequisite factors. A disruption such as those we often see in people with cerebral palsy, or low muscle tone, or hemiplegia, to name a few.

If there is insufficient range of motion to gain full hip or knee extension, one cannot completely straighten the knee to make heel contact during an initial step. Immobility in the heel cord limits the ankle's ability to move within full range and propel the lower leg over the foot. Weakness in the musculature might mean one cannot sustain weight on one limb long enough to progress the opposite limb forward.

Additional factors that affect gait include functional sensory systems, balance responses, and motor learning that enable us to activate our muscles in response to and in anticipation of environmental stimuli.

Physical therapists have an enormous amount of expertise in the normal development of gait and are able to analyze the components of movement to determine treatment plans.

How can Hippotherapy help?

Hippotherapy is an adjunct form of therapy that can support the gait-oriented goals of the physical therapist. The movement of the horse impacts the movement

of the rider in a manner that is similar to the gait cycle. EMG studies have shown that riding activates the muscles in a sequence similar to muscular activation during walking. However, the impact of hippotherapy goes beyond this.

Hippotherapy provides a multi-system impact on the rider. The position on the horse relaxes tight muscles in the lower extremities, while the constant three-dimensional movement requires an instant and continuous response from the rider causing an increase in strength and control over time. The horse is moving through space, which alerts the visual and vestibular systems which are closely tied to posture and movement. Additionally,

the proprioceptive, tactile, and kinesthetic systems are activated, all of which help improve awareness of body position in space and assist in functional motor responses.

Isn't it amazing that one horse can do all of that? Perhaps the primary influence of the horse is to create a fun and engaging experience for the rider. Fun and meaningful activities are known to have more long-lasting influence on learning, including motor learning.

We see better posture, better standing, and better walking after hippotherapy. In order to maximize its impact, hippotherapy is and should be a part of a comprehensive therapy program including physical and occupational therapy. At Exceptional Equestrians we are beginning to collect objective data on the impact of hippotherapy on gait using our gait analysis system.

Lisa Kafka, OTR, HPCS
Diane McInnis, PT

We see better posture, better standing, and better walking after hippotherapy.

A Challenge for You

by Aliyah Zeitler

Living with a disability can be difficult sometimes. You have to learn to overcome many obstacles. Basic things that most find easy can be hard if you have a disability. While it can be difficult, it's not impossible! People with disabilities can accomplish great things if they have courage and work hard.

A disability doesn't define who you are. Everyone has gifts if you only take the time to recognize them. Sometimes people stare or even laugh at people with disabilities. This is unfortunate. Being different isn't a bad thing. We are all different from each other, and it's what makes us each unique and special.

If you don't understand a person's disability or why they have a wheelchair or other helpful devices, just ask questions of them politely. It's better to have knowledge and treat others with respect.

What's most important is that all people deserve to be treated with respect, whether they have a disability or not. All people want to feel included, valued, and accepted for who they are. No one should have to change who they are to be accepted. I challenge you to step out of your comfort zone and reach out to others with more compassion. Showing love to others is what makes someone truly beautiful.

If you feel lonesome or unimportant, I want you to know that you have worth—we all do! People can't make you feel inferior without your permission, so stand tall and be proud of who you are. I'd be proud to call you my friend.

About the author: Read our front page story *Standing Tall and Proud* to learn more about Aliyah and her connection to Exceptional Equestrians.

Celebrating Exceptional Volunteers

Exceptional Equestrians celebrated its volunteers in January at its annual Volunteer Banquet and Service Awards sponsored by BayCare Green Bay Eye Clinic. In 2016, 200 volunteers donated 3,900 hours.

"Volunteers play a tremendous role at Exceptional Equestrians. We are extremely grateful for their commitment and dedication," said executive director Lisa Kafka.

The following volunteers who reached milestones in their service to Exceptional Equestrians received special recognition and awards:

800 hours
Birgit Dierberg
600 hours
Rod Leadley
500 hours
Darrell Kuntz
300 hours
Nicole Curran

150 hours
Jerry Heim
Dioni Wheeler
Susan Endries
Leaha Lindsley
Emily Jones
Denise Willems

100 hours
Gail Brittnacher
Ellen Gourley
Hannah Johnshoy
Andi Krawczyk
Destiny Lemus
Sam Merkel
Kay Patton
Chris Peterson
Leo Skarlupka
Lexi Young



Volunteers in Action. Pictured from left, volunteers Emily Jones and Darrell Kuntz help Myles Welnetz ride Maverick; and volunteers Connie VonArx, Birgit Dierberg, and Jerry Heim help Connor Olson ride Stella.

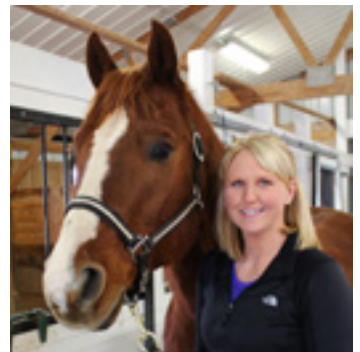
Staff Profile: Sarah Ankerson

Sarah Ankerson has been on staff at EE since 2012. In her role of equine specialist, she is responsible for training the therapy horses and managing the herd. Sarah is also a PATH-certified riding instructor and leads classes in therapeutic riding, recreational riding, and adaptive riding.

In the riding arena, Sarah excels at motivating riders of all abilities to work harder, learn more, and take pride in their accomplishments.

"I enjoy sharing my knowledge and skills to help people improve their skills," she said.

Sarah holds a degree in equine management and agriculture business from Michigan State University and has extensive experience in the equine training industry. She was a volunteer at EE throughout her teenage years.



Christmas in the Barn was a festive celebration for riders, family, and friends. Many thanks to the volunteers, staff, and sponsor Thrivent Financial. Pictured from left, Connie VonArx with guest rider James Wehling riding Maverick as Rod Leadley leads; Santa greets Lisa Kafka, Ethan Dezwarte atop Tia, Jenna Dais, and Darrell Kuntz; and Emily Jones with Robert Bergner riding Cooper as Susan Endries leads.

EE Hosting GB Police Mounted Patrol Unit

Exceptional Equestrians is pleased to announce a partnership with the Green Bay Police Department to become the official home of the Green Bay Mounted Patrol Unit. Exceptional Equestrians will board the MPU horses and help provide training and horsemanship support.

"We value collaboration," said Exceptional Equestrians executive director Lisa Kafka. "This is an excellent opportunity to coordinate resources and to broaden our reach in the community."

"The primary mission of the mounted patrol unit is to build positive relationships between Green Bay police officers and community members in a way that allows the public to approach officers, engages them in conversations, and builds trust," commented Chief Andrew Smith. Smith said he could not think of a better relationship to accomplish this than by partnering with

Exceptional Equestrians.

The two MPU horses, Casey and Lil' Joe, will be available to Exceptional Equestrians to also serve as therapy horses in their programs.

The Green Bay Mounted Patrol Unit was formed in August of 2016 and currently has ten officers who can be found out in the community riding their horses in neighborhoods and at public events and functions. [Follow them on Facebook](#) when they start their 2017 season this May.



MPU Lead Officer Luke Lansbach greets Lil' Joe upon his arrival at EE.

Contributing Veterinary Care

Healthy horses are crucial to the services Exceptional Equestrians provides. CountrySide Veterinary Services provides in-kind charitable support to help care for the therapy horses that impact so many people's lives.

CountrySide veterinarian Dr. Brian Darkow has been providing hands-on care at Exceptional Equestrians for four years. He donates his professional time, helps secure veterinary product donations, and makes himself available for on-call support.



"Everyone here has passion to be working at all hours. I will do likewise. I like being able to share the knowledge I've gained and apply it to a good cause."

In addition to helping with the horses, Brian enjoys taking part in the Therapeutic Riding classes during Career Day as a guest veterinarian. "The kids ask questions and talk about their animals," he said. "One boy asked me how tall giraffes were."

"Seeing the benefit to the riders and hearing parents talk about how much Exceptional Equestrians helps," Brian said, "I'm inspired to know that I can contribute."



EXCEPTIONAL EQUESTRIANS

Exceptional Equestrians is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization governed by a board of directors.

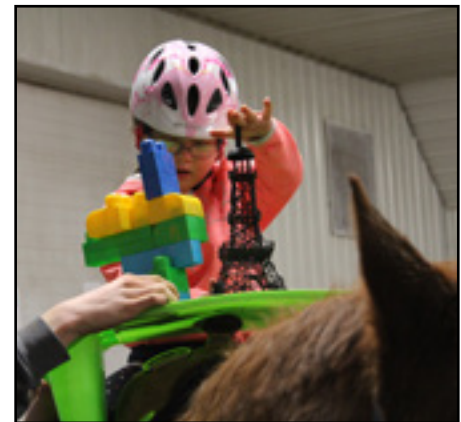
Our mission is to better the lives of people of all abilities through the healing power of horses.

Wish List

Item	Cost
Round pen	\$1,320
Industrial hose and reel	\$450
Rider safety belts	\$160
Fleet Farm gift card	\$100
Riding helmets size XL	\$50-\$60

You can help us impact more lives!

Visit exceptionalequestrians.org to donate today and to learn more.



Faith Coghlin sizes up the Eiffel Tower during Around the World week in Therapeutic Riding class.



Maverick participants team up to lead horses through their obstacle course.