

Iris learns that riding therapy benefits participants and volunteers



I recently had the opportunity to volunteer for the first time as a side walker for the Regina Riding Therapeutic Association. I chose this charity as I really like to be around horses and wanted to find out how riding could help those with disabilities.

Over the course of seven weeks, I worked with Kane, who has Cerebral Palsy. My responsibility was to ensure that Kane didn't slip off or lose his balance atop his horse, Blue. It was such a nice feeling being able to witness and share Kane's moments of happiness and pride while he rode Blue.

An instructor was nearby explaining to Kane how he had to pull on the reins in order to make the horse go the way the instructor indicated.

The instructor was also able to make Kane's riding therapy more fun using games. They included: moving rings from one pylon to another; a focused colour game (I spy with my little eyes...); figure 8's and serpentines which improve balance and strength as Kane had to use his hands and fingers to pull the reins in the appropriate direction; and the egg and spoon game – a special equestrian rubber ball in a spoon-like holder with a rubberized string that keeps the ball from falling too far.

We all took turns walking while trying not to drop the ball off the spoon. Even my granddaughter played the egg and spoon game with Kane. We also took turns winning and losing, ensuring that Kane won as well.

One of the neat things about this type of therapy is that it strengthens people's posture and hands.

As we returned each week, Kane would be very happy to see the volunteer team. He would tease and promise not to run over me. In some of the games he would come too close to the pylons and I would almost trip and/or bump into them. He thought this was very funny. Our job was also to praise and encourage Kane as he did a great job maintaining his posture and focus.

It was a great feeling to know that we were able to make his hour very pleasurable. It was very satisfying to see how that little bit of time made Kane so happy and excited to be riding. It was clear that these techniques taught Kane how to relax in the saddle, focus on a task and build stability, coordination and strength in his hands, posture and fingers.

My volunteer time is now over, but beyond how it helped Kane, it sure gave me an appreciation for my own health. And knowing that I was part of that happiness for just a short time in his life was very rewarding.

It was also interesting to learn how something like riding therapy can actually help to strengthen one's mobility and instill a sense of pride in one's self.