

A New Era Begins at Lothlorien



Photo by Marty Wangelin

Violet Perry, a volunteer at Lothlorien Therapeutic Riding Center, leads student Cheyenne Hunt around the area on horseback.

by **Kristy Kibler**
Editor

Ryan Swanson doesn't smile very often. It isn't that the 5-year-old is unhappy. It's just one of the symptoms of his autism, which was diagnosed when he was just 2 years old. But something changes when he visits East Aurora's Lothlorien Therapeutic Riding Center, where he takes horseback riding lessons. Sometimes, sitting tall atop his pony, Ryan breaks into a grin.

"When he gets on a horse and is smiling? That's worth a thousand bucks," said Ryan's mother, Jamie Swanson. "It's just amazing to watch. I'm seeing a little more of a personality of my son, like layers of healing are happening."

Those kinds of transformations are what Lothlorien is all about. Established in 1983, the center provides horseback riding opportunities for individuals of all ages with cognitive, physical, emotional and learning disabilities, though most are under the age of 18. And in the last year, LTRC has seen some serious transformation of its own.

New Leadership

In January, Lothlorien formed a new, eight-person board of directors that includes Jerilyn Hickey, director of Major Gifts for Red Cross Buffalo; Cheryl Klass, president of Women & Children's Hospital of Buffalo and vice president of Kaleida Health; and Sandra L. Ford, manager of HSBC Global Banking Finance.

"[It] brought in new energy, new relationships, new skill sets," said East Aurora resident and the president of Lothlorien's board of directors, Dr. Christopher Kerr, the chief medical officer for Hospice

Buffalo. "We've got a professional foundation."

Maggie McCooley, formerly a part-time riding instructor, was promoted to executive director of the facility. The former board became an operational committee, which oversees and organizes the day-to-day responsibilities of the center. The paid instructors have increased from three to about 10, and every instructor is accredited by the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH), as is the entire facility.

There is also a new volunteer coordinator, East Aurora resident Deb Jerge, and veterinary services are offered free of charge by another local, Peter Kanter.

New Facilities

At the beginning of the year, the new leaders at Lothlorien wasted no time in taking what capital they had and using it to update and renovate the center's barn, arenas and stable area. The entire facility is now ADA-compliant and wheelchair accessible.

Kerr noted the extreme generosity of the community in their renovation efforts. Two examples of selflessness include East Aurora's Dar Almeter, of Ciminelli Construction, whose efforts and materials replaced the bumpy, uneven dirt floor in the barn with concrete at no cost. The Keller family, also of East Aurora, is taking care of renovating the facility's classroom and insulating it for use in cold weather.

LTRC has also updated its herd of horses. In the past, some horses at the center were unusable because of lameness, age or other reasons. Now, the entire gang of 13 horses at Lothlorien is healthy, happy and being used by riders, Kerr said. Many are

leased rather than owned by the center.

"That way, they always have a home to go back to," McCooley said.

New Partnerships

Perhaps the biggest change to Lothlorien in 2012 is the expansion of the services offered and the groups to which the center reaches out.

"We redefined who we saw as beneficiaries of the experience that Lothlorien could provide," Kerr said. "We formed new community partnerships—we wanted to cast a larger net, with this serving as a community resource for multiple types of people who would benefit."

Since January, servicemen and women from the Buffalo and Batavia Veterans Administration Hospitals, children from the Buffalo City Mission, Seneca Babcock Church, the Buffalo Hospice grief counseling program, Gilda's Club and the School for the Deaf have all visited Lothlorien for the first time.

"The whole idea was to reinvigorate the place," Kerr said. "We probably served approximately 400 individuals this season—we went from about 150 [served in a year] to 400-plus."

The center also started offering a vision enhancement program through the Aurora Optometric Group. The partnership was born as a result of another connection—the Aurora Optometric Group's vision therapist serves on LTRC's operations committee.

"Some of the children ... the [vision] homework they had for them at home, they wouldn't do it," said Maggie McCooley. "So we found that if you put them on the back of a horse ... they were much more receptive."

Jamie Swanson, who has another son, Dylan, who also rides at LTRC, sees the same sort of response with her own sons.

"It kind of sums up everything these kids normally get—speech, occupational therapy, physical therapy, everything," she said. "They are taking all those things that they've learned and they're integrating them in a different context. They're on their horse, doing all this therapy ... but it doesn't feel like work to them."

Lothlorien has also expanded to other facilities besides its main site at 15 Reiter Road. Various classes are held at the Fierles' Lost Elms farm in East Aurora, as well as Kerr's own property, Providence Farm. These partnerships have helped LTRC deal with space constraints.

From psychotherapy such as grief counseling and emotional issues to physical therapy and simple confidence building, equine therapy has a profound effect on the people who are exposed to it, Kerr said.

"It's very therapeutic, the bond between a child and a horse," he said. "It's trust, it's touch, it's all those things. It gives them a sense of control. For a child who can't move properly, the movement of the horse closely simulates the human gait. When you think about it, a child who has never felt his postural position change ... now gets to experience that with a horse."

McCooley agreed and pointed out that students don't have to ride the horses to benefit from them. In some of the programs offered for grief counseling groups, participants don't saddle up at all.

"The horse is able to either come to you or leave—it's really more of a free-flowing conversation that you're having," she said. "A horse is nonjudgmental—you're not going to be told 'that's a silly thing to feel'."

"Joy is pretty powerful if you're a grieving child," Kerr added. "It works—we see results."

The Future

The next goal of the new and improved Lothlorien is to offer services year-round rather than just from May to November.

"We started early this year, and we've got too much energy to stop now," Kerr said.

To offer those expanded months of service, though, the number of volunteers must expand, as well. McCooley said as many as three volunteers are needed for some students, plus an instructor. Volunteers must be 14 years old and be able to commit to at least one six-week session, which breaks down into a one-hour class per week.

"We're looking for that type of commitment ... because a lot of the students rely on a good relationship with the volunteers and find it very difficult to change," she said.

Lothlorien's mission is to never deny someone who could benefit from the services it offers, which is why the center offers rider scholarships and grants for people who might have trouble paying for the sessions. Kerr emphasized that people or organizations interested in donating to Lothlorien can designate their donations to go to scholarship funds.

For Swanson, that deep generosity sets the facility apart from others like it.

"The wonderful thing about Lothlorien is that they're in tune with the parents' needs and realize that the parents have so many other expenses ... they don't turn anyone away," she said. "It's more than just talking about horses and therapy—it's really becoming part of the family."

For more information on Lothlorien, whether it be session schedules, horse biographies or how to volunteer, visit www.lothlorientrc.org or call 655-1335.



Photo by Kristy Kibler

Some of Lothlorien Therapeutic Riding Center's recent facility improvements include rebuilt, renovated stalls and floors of smooth, level concrete throughout the barn.