

More than just horsing around

Rock Ranch at Hills provides unique experiences for youths, seniors

By Alyssa Sobotka
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HILLS — What started as horse lover Marie LaRock's self-professed "simple idea" of providing an opportunity for kids to spend time in nature with horses is quickly transforming her family's Hills ranch into a destination where students develop skills far beyond cinching up a saddle.

Using horses as her main teaching tool, LaRock teaches Rock Ranch students a strong work ethic, confidence, courage, patience, responsibility, social/emotional wellbeing and many other traits from atop a horse's back.

"We're about providing a recreational experience for kids in a learning environment," LaRock said of the ranch's mission, which also includes a Christian component.

In the first two years of its existence, more than 130 youths from communities across Minnesota, Iowa, South Dakota and North Dakota have saddled up and received horseback riding lessons from LaRock.

She says Rock Ranch is not about showmanship, poling, barrel racing or roping.

"We're just giving kids opportunities to get on horses and to have fun," LaRock said, adding that the majority of her students are youths who want a horse but aren't able to have one.

A trained speech pathologist, LaRock uses a Bible

verse to guide her lessons and add a faith-based component to student lessons, which are tailored to them based on their unique needs.

Whether it's developing more strength, balance and coordination, cognitive skills or social skills, all of the lessons start similarly with students retrieving and preparing their horse depending on their individual abilities.

"I don't have everything saddled up and ready to go," LaRock said. "When they come, they have to do the work."

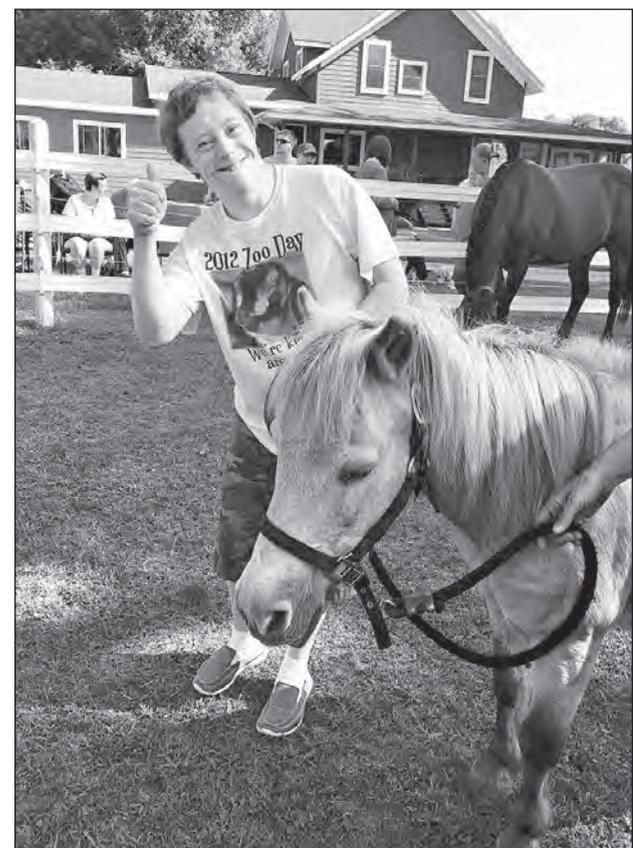
When the student's horse is ready, the team takes to the ranch's outdoor arena where each student must learn to communicate with their horse.

One thing LaRock doesn't believe in is having students make circles around the arena. Every movement the students instruct their horse to make is with a specific purpose or task to accomplish.

Whether students are tasked with gathering fake food for a picnic that's dispersed on various fence posts around the arena, retrieving the correct ingredients represented on clothespins for a specific recipe or any other of LaRock's several objectives, the mini tasks not only improve students' cognitive abilities and life skills, but promote a more natural horsemanship learning opportunity, LaRock said.

"Just having that kind of a job allows (students) to be more relaxed on their horse," LaRock said.

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Rock Ranch's Shetland pony, Spirit, puts a smile on a visitor's face during Rock County Opportunities' a one-day outing. RCO works with individuals of all abilities.

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Senior Saddles

LaRock and her horses aren't only providing unique opportunities to youths. With the idea and desire to offer experiences for seniors since the nonprofit's inception, LaRock started small — with a litter of kittens.

At the request of a former staff member at Tuff Memorial Home, LaRock loaded up a litter of kittens in the spring of 2017 and brought them remotely to the senior residents.

Feeding off the positive response, LaRock later brought Spirit, her Shetland pony, to the residents for another visit.

Residents have even visited the farm in each of the last two summers and gotten to meet some of the ranch's horses, dogs and cats.

"Apparently the first time they came out it was all they could talk about for a month," LaRock said, adding that caregivers were surprised about the effect generating memories has on its residents.

LaRock said one resident — who she guessed to be in his 90s — even hopped on.

"That was super fun to see and all the residents were proud of him. They couldn't believe it," she said. "He was all smiles."

A group from Rock County Opportunities — a training and habilitation site that serves people with developmental and related disabilities — also visited Rock Ranch for a one-day event in which participants brushed, combed and led the horses around. One gentleman spent the afternoon laying on the grass and playing with three baby kittens, she added.

More in store?

LaRock said the ranch would not be possible without the grant funding and charitable contributions it has received, its volunteers and her husband, Dan, who works primarily with the business side of the nonprofit.

Excited about the progress she's witnessed in students and seniors alike during Rock Ranch's first two seasons, LaRock has bigger dreams for the ranch.

One of her ultimate goals is to be in the position to add an indoor arena so programs could continue year-round rather than being limited to May through September. She also would like to expand

the ranch's offering to individuals with specific mental health needs. Getting more senior citizens who are still able to ride a horse is another goal she has. She said having seniors works with horses has the potential to improve an individual's strength, balance and coordination.

LaRock would also like to allow her more advanced riders the opportunity to ride independently, pending their ability to prove they could do so safely.

"Right now we're putting ideas into a funnel and providing opportunities and it will funnel down into what it is meant to be," LaRock said of what she sees for the ranch's future.

Meanwhile, LaRock is passionate about the unique experiences now provided to youths and seniors alike.

"I truly believe we were led to do this by God and felt a push to do something for years," she said. "Finally, I listened."



Photo courtesy of Mavis Fodness / Rock County Star Herald Dorothy Sikma enjoys brushing the horse named Spaghetti Eddie.



Special to The Globe A Tuff Memorial Home resident enjoys petting one of Rock Ranch's cats during a fall outing to the Hills ranch.



Special to The Globe

Marie LaRock (standing) leads Rock Ranch's Shetland pony, Spirit, around her Hills ranch to greet and interact with Tuff Memorial Home residents.



Photo courtesy of Mavis Fodness/Rock County Star Herald Grace Miller smiles at the Rock Ranch's 28-year-old horse, Penny, who is nicknamed Grandma as the ranch's oldest horse.

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