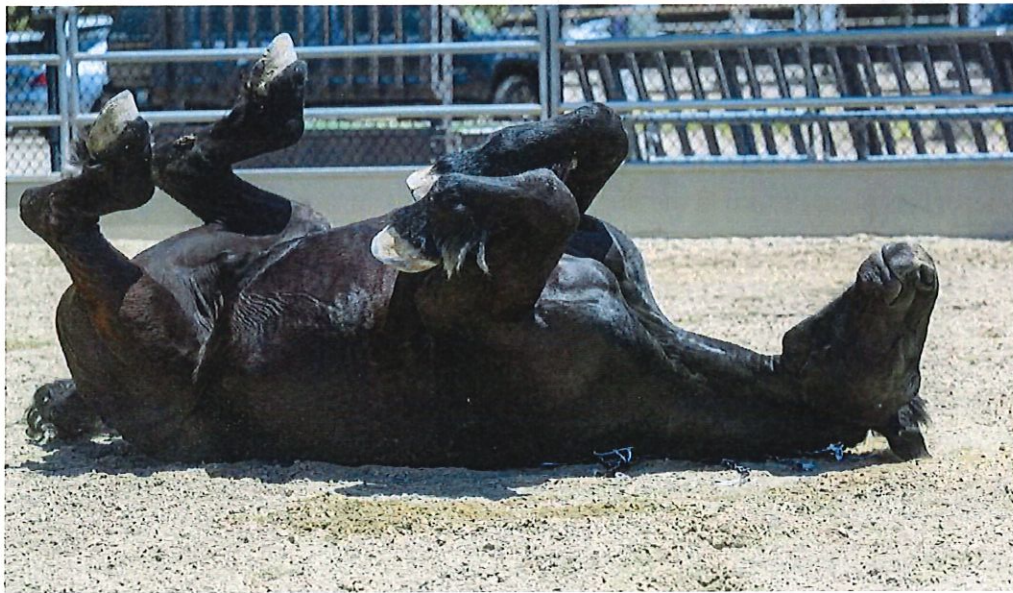


LOCAL NEWS

Summer camp is all about horsing around

Kids with and without disabilities come together for fun



Dante, an 1,800-pound Percheron, entertains as he rolls in the dirt during Shea Horse Camp in San Juan Capistrano on Wednesday, June 22, 2022. (Photo by Mindy Schauer, Orange County Register/SCNG)

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Nestled beneath the hills in San Juan Capistrano, the J.F. Shea Therapeutic Riding Center treats 840 clients each year, with diagnoses ranging from autism to cerebral palsy, genetic disorders to head injuries, and more.

But for several weeks during summer — June 20 through July 29 along with a few days in August — the riding center operates Shea Camp, which is all about fun and horse play, as it hosts kids with and without disabilities.



"Kids are divided by age, not disability," Sarah Booth, the communications director, said.

It may be the first time some campers encounter someone with a disability, she added.

But no one seemed to care. On a recent June day, a group of five children sat together and laughed as they watched a horse named Huckleberry stumble around the dirt, looking for carrots they hid earlier underneath green, blue, and orange cones. They waited as one girl who needed help walking hid her carrots for the horse to find.

"Go to orange, go to orange," the campers chanted as they tried to direct the 1,270-pound gypsy draft-cross horse to the right spot.

Like protective parents, counselors made excuses for the equine's lack of intuition.

"He's new at this," they explained.

When it was Auggie's turn in the ring, the 13-year-old Arabian put Huckleberry to shame, gracefully knocking over all 10 cones to retrieve the treats in just one minute and 43 seconds compared to Huckleberry's 13 minutes.

The week-long camp featured horse-related activities, including arts and crafts where children put their colorful handprints in paint on the horses' coats. There are barn chores, like walking Mac 'N Cheese, a miniature horse and camp favorite, and just greeting other horses like Boog, a one-eyed Amish pony.

And of course, there is the horseback riding.

Five-year-old Olive Ripps wore pink cowboy boots and a horse-themed T-shirt while counselor Ellie Hughes used courtesy titles to address the children: "Miss Olive, what do we do with our eyes and our head?"

Ripps' mother, Rachel, said her daughter, who has autism, "adores camp" and has been memorizing the horses' and staffs' names.

Although camp is about fun and not therapy, the two sometimes intersect.

"Horses don't have a prefrontal cortex," Booth said. "They respond very authentically. They mirror back and help us understand emotions."

Camper Olivia Miller knows this first hand. She is also in the center's Stars and Stripes Military Program that offers riding lessons to veterans and their families.

"I feel a lot more calm on a horse. It's like therapy," the outgoing 10-year-old, who has been riding for three years, said. "It's like we're a team. I have to work with the horse and the horse has to work with me."



Her father, Bill Miller, said it's a "mitzvah" for Olivia to be around kids with disabilities.

"It teaches her how lucky she is in life," he said.

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Mindy Schauer is an award-winning photojournalist for the Orange County Register. As a general-interest news photographer, she documents everyone and everything, from poverty in the hollows of West Virginia, to sports heroes and celebrities in Hollywood. She has covered Hurricane Andrew, California wildfires, Pope Francis, four presidents, and religious outreach in Rwanda — not to mention puppies, schoolkids and everyday life in her community. Mindy is a two-time Marine Corps Heritage Foundation award winner and ranks among the top photographers in the National Press Photographers Association's Western Region each year. Mindy's Pulitzer-nominated work documenting the life of a teen mom and her children hangs in the Clinton Presidential Library in Arkansas. And when Mindy's own daughter, Jenna, was born, Mindy photographed the birth herself for a feature in the Register. Mindy is a graduate of the Arizona State University Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication. Before joining the Register, she worked at the Huntington (W.Va.) Herald-Dispatch, Los Angeles Times and Orlando Sentinel.

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