

Windridge Therapeutic Equestrian Center of East Texas, Inc.

Organizational History –

In 1989 Windridge opened its doors as the first therapeutic riding center in East Texas. With one instructor (Margo Dewkett – Windridge’s founder), five horses and two clients, Windridge began serving individuals with disabilities through a unique form of therapy; therapeutic riding. As a Premier Accredited Center with the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association, (NARHA), Windridge is one of only 16 such centers in Texas. Weekly more than 140 children and adults come to Windridge to participate in one of Windridge’s therapeutic horsemanship programs individually tailored to meet the specific needs of those who participate.

In 1997 Windridge purchased 23 acres adjoining its founded location, providing additional grazing land for the horses, more room to ride, and a place that in the future Windridge could build a permanent home. In May of 2001, construction began on a 38,000 square foot state-of-the-art covered facility that would be Windridge’s home. This facility will allow classes to continue during inclement weather and provide adequate room for additional program growth. In January of 2002, classes began in our covered facility, the first of its kind in Texas designed specifically for therapeutic horsemanship programs.

During the years that Windridge has been serving the community, several programs have developed: therapeutic riding, therapeutic driving, hippotherapy, a program focusing on our veterans – *Horses for Heroes*, an education program, an adult volunteer program and a teenage volunteer/mentoring program – *Quest for Success*. A full time staff of NARHA certified therapeutic riding and driving instructors, 24 horses and more than 50 volunteers assist us weekly in providing these programs to a 60 mile area in East Texas.

Windridge’s Mission –

Our mission is to enhance the lives of children and adults who face life with a mental, emotional, or physical disability, or debilitating situation, and to make a positive difference in the lives of our volunteers and staff.

Programs –

Windridge offers several programs: therapeutic riding, therapeutic driving, hippotherapy, a program focusing on our veterans – *Horses for Heroes*, an education program, an adult volunteer program and a teenage volunteer/mentoring program – *Quest for Success*. Each of these programs utilizes horses; their therapeutically beneficial movement, care, and education are the tools that impact those with disabilities and/or dysfunctional problems. Windridge charges a fee of \$30.00 per class however no one will be turned away due to an inability to pay. There are many factors that cause a family or program participant to request a scholarship such as insurance caps, the high cost of traditional therapy or specialized medical care, government cuts to Medicare and most recently the high cost of gasoline strapping family budgets prevents many families from paying the class fee. Through the generosity of the community Windridge is able to provide scholarships to individuals in need of financial assistance. Individuals, civic groups, corporations, and foundations provide scholarships that allow clients to participate at no cost to their family.

Therapeutic Riding – This program provides an innovative and highly beneficial form of therapy incorporating education and exercise utilizing the beneficial movement of the horse while teaching riding skills. The horse’s movement manipulates a rider’s body to the finest degree as if they are walking.

Therapeutic Driving - Our therapeutic driving program allows individuals to participate who are unable to sit astride a horse for reasons such as; degenerative disease, excessive weight, certain types of seizure activity, or extreme fear of environmental situations. As participants learn to drive a horse drawn cart they are transformed from observers to active participants, providing many physical benefits such as joint compression and system stimulation, which is vital to an inactive body.

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Hippotherapy – (Hippo is Greek for horse). Using the horse as a dynamic therapy tool, the hippotherapy program provides an alternative form of therapy implemented by licensed Physical, Occupational, or Speech therapists working in conjunction with NARHA Certified Instructors (Windridge staff) to provide the maximum benefit possible to meet client's therapy goals. It is proven through research that the horse takes approximately 3,000 steps in 30 minutes. This is 3,000 repetitions of a therapeutic movement a client receives which can not be duplicated in any other fashion off of the horse, (on their own, or by a machine). This rhythmic movement of the horse's gait is used to influence the client's posture, balance, coordination, mobility and function.

Horses for Heroes Program – Throughout the years Windridge has stepped up to the plate to seek ways to serve our veterans and with this attitude we have had men who served our country in World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and Desert Storm utilize our therapeutic services. Windridge along with other therapeutic riding centers throughout our country are excited a formal program has been developed and endorsed by the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA) and leaders of our country. Windridge is eager to continue seeking ways to strengthen our veteran program.

Quest for Success – The youth in our community (ages 14 to college age) develop leadership, job skills, ethics, empathy, positive peer interaction and group cooperation as they assist Windridge staff in serving individuals with disabilities as part of our *Quest for Success* program. After receiving 40 initial hours of training Windridge instructors continue to teach the *Quest for Success* volunteer horsemanship skills, horse care, communication skills, problem solving techniques and awareness of various disabilities. As *Quest for Success* volunteer works with our instructors, they are progressed through 3 levels of skill development. This increased knowledge base ensures their ability to assist therapeutic riding instructors in conducting safe, effective and therapeutic programs for each client.

Adult Volunteer Program – Adults who wish to give back to the community participate in our adult volunteer program, receiving 40 initial hours of training. As each adult volunteer works with our instructors, they are progressed through 3 levels of skill development. This increased knowledge base ensures their ability to assist therapeutic riding instructors in conducting safe, effective and therapeutic programs for each client.

Education Program – From its conception Windridge's priority has been to provide a high standard of education for its staff, volunteers, horses, and community at large. Throughout the years many have sought our methods and gained their knowledge and skills in our formal educational program. In 2006 Windridge completed an educational equine training film available in DVD and web cast format. This film is titled *Standard of Behavior for Horse and Horseman – Ground Schooling*. This is the first of three films in the series designed to enhance the education of therapeutic riding instructors, therapists providing hippotherapy, counselors providing equine assisted therapy, and professionals throughout the equine industry and horse owners (refer to our Education Page on our website for more information). Our films are intended to be utilized in therapeutic instructor training courses, hippotherapy educational classes and seminars, and universities related courses such as equine science, therapeutic riding, and hippotherapy. A course syllabus, workbook and tests complete the educational materials offered. There is also a strong interest in Windridge providing education materials via web cast formats. Windridge is continuing to develop and enhance this program for the benefit of our industry and universities. It is exciting to announce that Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas has accepted Windridge's educational materials and are using them in their courses. Windridge looks forward to its continued involvement with Texas Tech and other universities.

NOTE: Throughout the years Windridge has developed a relationship with several colleges and universities providing their students with a location for visits, rotations, and internships. The colleges and universities involved with Windridge are Kilgore College's nursing and physical therapy assistant schools, Panola College's certified occupational therapy assistant school, University of Texas at Tyler nursing and psychology schools, Letourneau University's teacher school and kinesiology classes and Texas Tech University.

Program Impact –

Therapeutic riding is Windridge's foundation. This program continues to grow as clients, families, volunteers and the community realize its profound therapeutic benefits. For example, a client not only learns how to groom, saddle and ride a horse, but also experiences personal growth and the necessary self motivation to reach beyond the limits

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of their disability. Family members of clients benefit by seeing their physically or mentally challenged loved one participate in a therapeutic activity without prejudice or ridicule. Volunteers receive a rewarding sense of satisfaction from helping students attain new goals and reach higher levels of achievement. Many also enjoy learning new skills such as sign language, horse's health care and nutrition, and stable management.

Physical Benefits – The merits of physical exercise are indisputable. People with disabilities, however, are often excluded from the very activities that would benefit the most. Horseback riding is an alternative form of exercise ideally suited for this population. While sitting on the back of a walking horse, the rider's upper and lower body muscles and joints are exercised. This movement produces weight bearing through limbs and joints, rotation of the pelvis, sensory stimulation and strengthening and stretching of muscles. These effects occur regardless of the rider's physical abilities.

Jim Brady, President Reagan's former press secretary wounded in the 1981 assassination attempt is a strong advocate of therapeutic riding and attributes much of his physical recovery to horseback riding. A young woman with multiple sclerosis praises Windridge for her progress: "There are many noticeable improvements in my physical condition thanks to Windridge. Overall my gait is more even, my legs are less spastic, I've increased my balance 100%, and my upper body strength has expanded."

Psychological Benefits: The psychological benefits of therapeutic riding are an important element of our program and enhance the physical benefits clients receive. Learning to control a 1200 pound animal builds self-confidence, promotes independence and helps our students feel proud of their accomplishments. This psychological boost is a vital part of our programs, whether the client is a young child with Down syndrome, a troubled teen or an elderly stroke victim.

Many wheelchair-bound clients express feeling a sense of freedom when they ride as the horse can take them where their wheelchair cannot. One mother of a Windridge client stated "I think the greatest gift Windridge has to offer anyone is the acceptance of each person as an individual. Windridge is one place where my son is always accepted for who he is, how he is. Windridge is one place where he never looks disabled. In fact, he looks able in every way."

Educational and Social Benefits: A mother of a nine-year-old Windridge client wrote, "Windridge has been an answered prayer. My son started to improve in school after the first visit. I never thought a horse, of all animals, would benefit my son so." Various educational skills such as the alphabet, colors, opposites, word association, sequential thinking, appropriate behavioral issues, etc. are incorporated into the therapeutic riding classes based on the client's individual needs and goals. Our program helps broaden the attention span of children with Attention Deficit Disorder and learning disabilities by encouraging them to focus on an activity that is both fun and educational. Horseback riding offers immediate rewards and positive re-enforcement for these clients who often struggle to succeed in traditional classroom settings.

Most clients have individual class times, however small group classes promote cooperation, team work and social interaction. Therapeutic riding teaches new skills, provides an opportunity to make new friends and is a fun experience with a purpose.

What Sets Windridge Apart –

Windridge and its programs are unique in several ways:

- We require no school or organizational affiliation on the part of those we help, instead accepting all who can benefit.
- No one is turned away due to inability to pay.
- Windridge is a Premier Accredited Center (one of only 16 in Texas) with the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association, (NARHA).
- Our entire staff is comprised of certified therapeutic riding instructors. Our Head Instructor is certified at the Master Level, one of only 12 active in the United States.
- All staff is required to work towards and obtain their certification in therapeutic driving at the second level.

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- Windridge was the first NARHA accredited center in East Texas.
- Windridge was the first center in Texas to offer therapeutic driving.
- Windridge was the first center in Texas to offer hippotherapy.
- Windridge's facility is the first of its kind in Texas designed specifically for therapeutic horsemanship programs.