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Galloping ahead: Equine therapy program trying to acquire Dover horse facility

By PETE WICKLUND
Journal Times

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DOVER — What a difference a few months can make.

Last summer, Jennifer Pape had received permission from the county and the Town of Rochester to use her family's backyard as the base for a fledgling equine therapeutic program called Willow Creek Ranch Inc.

Now Pape, her core of regular associates and a growing legion of volunteers have moved to an indoor arena located just east of Rochester and southeast of Waterford, and they are working to purchase the arena and the 80-acre site on which it's located. The site is along Highway 20 just west of Sharp Road.

Last fall, the Willow Creek staff launched its pilot therapy program for children with various physical and mental challenges and disabilities. Pape, who has certification from the North American Riding for The Handicapped Association, says riding horses can help people by improving visual orientation; increasing body awareness; improving self esteem and socialization; and helping with muscle tone and flexibility.

With no indoor facilities at the Pape property on Maple Road a few miles west of the Village of Rochester, the Willow Creek crew was anticipating a long furlough during the winter months.

"We were making progress and we didn't want to stop for the winter," said Pape.

That's where Richard Beere came into the picture. In 2000, Beere began developing a facility to train harness racing trotter horses on the 80-acre site across Highway 20 from his home. The facility, including the indoor barn and 5/8-mile outdoor track, was used for a couple of years until Beere found that it was cheaper to hire trainers at the Illinois tracks where he was racing. So the facility was put on the market and sat empty for a couple of years.



Gavin Schultz plays catch with Jennifer Pape, left, during a riding session Jan. 5 at Willow Creek Ranch, an equine therapy program. The ranch hopes to purchase the horse arena on Highway 20 near Lakeview Rehabilitation Center. Photo by Gregory Shaver Journal Times

Pape drives by the facility every day to her job as outpatient coordinator for physical occupation and speech therapy at Lakeview Specialty Hospital and Rehab, located at Highway 20 and Sharp Road and the wheels began turning in her head.

She met with Beere and his Realtor for the property and after hearing about Willow Creek's mission, Beere was quick to make a decision to let Willow Creek use the arena free of charge.

"They really need it," Beere said. "I see the kids there on Thursdays and Saturdays. These women have so much energy and they have made so much progress."

Even though Beere has received inquiries from developers interested in the site, Beere is keeping an indefinite window open for Pape and company to try to raise the roughly \$2 million cost of the land and buildings. He has even made a contribution of \$250,000 toward the down payment.

The Willow Creek staff is pursuing the purchase with vigor and has already obtained donations or pledges amounting to approximately \$20,000. That includes a recent pledge of \$10,000 from Waterford-based Runzheimer International, the international travel and cost of living cost business consulting firm.

Burlington-based Cooperative Plus Inc. is donating feed for the therapy horses Willow Creek stables.

"It is every horse lover's dream to be able to use a facility like this. It's just unbelievable," Pape said.

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Willow Creek is also raising money from the sponsoring of stalls at the Beere site and will have an open house fundraising event on from 5 to 10 p.m.

Feb. 23 at the arena. The event will include tours, demonstrations, horse rides, hors d'oeuvres, beverages and a silent auction.

Embracing an "if you build it they will come" philosophy, Pape says the therapy program can only grow and she already is considering branching out.

Since its inception in the fall, the program has gone from three clients to 17, including kids ranging in age from 6 to 17 and two adult participants as well. There is a waiting list of approximately 17. The volunteer force has grown from eight to 35 and many have experience of working with horses or children or both.

Therapy sessions now take place on Saturdays from 10 a.m. until 1 p.m. and on Thursday evenings.

"The need is there to add classes during the week," Pape said.

One of the areas Willow Creek is looking at branching into is serving as a site for the Horses For Heroes program. Coordinated by North American Riding for the Handicapped Association, the program offers equine therapy for returning injured soldiers. Pape said Willow Creek staff has contacted local American Legion and Anvets chapters and the Veteran Affairs Hospitals for assistance with that

possibility.

"We have a lot of irons in the fire for sure," Pape said.

Donations and volunteers are always needed and Pape said Willow Creek's business adviser, Hally Arzola, is close to obtaining tax-exempt status paperwork for the organization.

On the Net

Willow Creek Ranch Inc.: <http://www.willowcreekranch.org>

North American Riding for the Handicapped Association: <http://www.narha.org>

Runzheimer International: <http://www.runzheimer.com>

How to Help

WHAT: Willow Creek Ranch open house and fundraiser.

WHEN: 5 to 10 p.m. Feb. 23.

WHERE: Willow Creek Ranch indoor arena, 27435 Washington Ave. (just west of Sharp Road), Dover.

WHAT: Tours, demonstrations, horse rides, hors d'oeuvres, beverages and a silent auction.

HOW TO HELP: Items are being south for the silent auction. Contact Michelle Bolton, fundraising chair, at (262) 806-4775.

Donations for the program in general can be sent to: Jennifer Pape, Willow creek Ranch, 2623 Maple Road, Burlington, WI 53105

E-MAIL: info@willowcreekranch.org

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