

Sonora Creek Specialties

This Georgia horse facility is a magical place for children and adults.

By Jessica Bieber

At Sonora Creek, hundreds of students learn about self-improvement through equine interactions. Mary Frankel, head instructor and owner of the Georgia facility, offers riding lessons to help students accomplish their goals, but it is her involvement with the barn's therapeutic and hippotherapy programs that makes her eyes light up.

"When they're out on the horses, they can achieve so much," Mary says.

Equine Endeavors

After riding her first horse at the age of 8, Mary began showing hunters and jumpers in Florida. She showed at American Horse Shows Association competitions for 15 years and, during that time, discovered she could teach therapeutic riding lessons while maintaining her amateur rider status.

After working in therapeutic riding programs in New York, Mary moved to Georgia and began her own program in September 1995 on a small 5-acre facility near Atlanta.

"There was such a need for it when I moved here," she says.

As participants in the therapy program and riding lessons increased, Mary's facility began feeling smaller and smaller. She packed up her horses and students in 2002 and built a state-of-the-art facility in Canton, Georgia, about 30 miles north of Atlanta.

Currently, Sonora Creek boasts a 24-stall barn loaded with amenities, including an attached indoor arena, on 22 acres in the Georgia countryside.

With the spacious 80-feet by 200-feet indoor arena attached to the barn, clients can ride their horses without having to set foot outside during inclement weather. A lounge overlooks the indoor arena as well, allowing parents and observers to watch riders while enjoying some creature comforts, including heating, air conditioning and television. A 200-feet by 300-feet outdoor jumping arena makes additional riding space available, and fenced pastures provide about 13 acres of equine recreation.

Mary Frankel currently houses 34 horses at her facility, including two of her own. Some of the privately-owned horses are used in the barn's

lesson program, an arrangement that helps keep overhead costs low, she said. The diverse Sonora Creek herd encompasses several breeds, including Thoroughbreds, Quarter Horses, Warmbloods and Connemara ponies.

One of the reasons Mary teaches riding lessons is because she likes to see her students grasp the concepts she teaches.

“ I love teaching little kids to ride,” she says. “Like the way their eyes light up when they finally understand what posting is all about.”

About 100 students migrate to the barn weekly for hunter-jumper, dressage, therapeutic riding and hippotherapy lessons. The majority of Sonora Creek students are involved in typical riding lessons or therapeutic riding, and the remaining 30 to 40 students participate in the hippotherapy program. The therapeutic riding and hippotherapy programs are called Sonora Farm, Mary says.

Healing Horsepower

Significant differences exist between therapeutic riding and hippotherapy, explains Bethany Nugent, who is a physical therapist and head of the Sonora Farm hippotherapy program. Hippotherapy is administered by professional physical and occupational therapists who work with disabled riders on horseback.

“ Horses are our tool of treatment,” she says. Therapists set goals for each student and use the movement and contact of a horse to achieve the goals.

Therapeutic riding teaches disabled riders how to maneuver a horse on their own and is taught by instructors who are familiar with disabilities. Students in the hippotherapy program typically progress to therapeutic riding lessons after their goals are met.

“ Our goal is to teach kids how to ride a horse, whether on a recreational or competitive level,” Bethany says.

Currently, the Sonora Farm program includes riders who are 2 years old to 21 years old with a wide range of disabilities; however, students with cerebral palsy and autism dominate the barn’s roster. Bethany Nugent and Mary Frankel are both certified instructors with the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association, and Bethany is also a board-certified hippotherapy clinical specialist.

When students come to lessons at Sonora Farm, they are exposed to various stimuli. Some participants are sensitive to skin sensations, and the horses help the students conquer the hurdles, Bethany explained.

“ The horse and barn environment provide sensory input,” she says. “There is just so much contacting them, and they learn to cope with it because the horse motivates them.”

Other students require physical therapy to learn to walk – a goal that is uniquely suited to a horse because its walking gait manipulates the rider’s pelvis and hips in a similar motion.

“ The horse’s gait stimulates a natural gait,” Bethany says. “You can’t reproduce it anywhere else.”

Mary, who teaches the regular and therapeutic riding lessons, said horses can produce amazing, and sometimes unexpected, results.

“ I’ve had kids here, 4 or 5 years old, that have said their first words,” Mary explains. “It’s wonderful that a horse has brought that out. Sometimes it just comes out of nowhere and just wows you.”

The program uses different types of horses in the therapy program, comprising different breeds and sizes, to accommodate each rider’s needs. One trait all the therapy horses share is a calm, willing temperament, as the horses must tolerate different learning toys and riding positions, according to Bethany.

“ We’re lucky at Sonora because we have a wide range of horses that are acceptable to therapy,” Bethany says. Sonora Farm’s therapy horse roster includes mostly medium-size horses, but they do use a 17-hand horse for some students.

A rider’s horse is selected based on the goals the rider is trying to achieve. For example, if the therapist is trying to relax the rider’s pelvis and simulate a walking gait, a horse with a long, deep step might be chosen. Riders typically use the same horses in their therapy sessions.

Lending a Helping Hand

Although Sonora Farm does not charge much money for their services, some families may still have a hard time paying for the riding sessions. To help alleviate this problem, Bethany Nugent began her own non-profit business in 2003, Bethany’s Equine and Aquatic Therapeutic Services (B. E.A.T.S.). The business raises money for scholarships that sponsor riders in Sonora Farm’s hippotherapy and therapeutic riding programs.

Mary Frankel believes the scholarships are a valuable asset to the program.

“ If they can’t afford it, we look for a way to help them ride,” she says.

Bethany agrees, and she points out that the scholarship program makes Sonora Farm different from other hippotherapy and therapeutic riding programs in the area.

“ We’re looking to find that niche in the community,” she says. “We want every kid who wants to have contact with horses to have it.”

Each scholarship provides three months of funding for a disabled rider to participate in hippotherapy or therapeutic lessons. The program is “open to any child with a disability in an equine activity,” Bethany says. “Anything that puts a kid with a horse.”

Last year, six students were accepted into the scholarship program: Four ride in Sonora Farm’s hippotherapy program, and two participate in therapeutic riding lessons.

In order to apply for scholarships, several documents must be provided to the organization, including a list of out-of-pocket medical expenses and a statement of need. Students are chosen based on their need for the service and their attendance to the program once they are accepted.

“ We don’t want to say no to anyone who qualifies,” Bethany explains.

Riders are eligible to receive a maximum of three scholarships over a one-year period. After the year is complete, riders must pay for their own services or find an individual or company sponsor. In addition, all students receive a three-month scholarship for therapeutic riding after they meet their hippotherapy goals and graduate from the program.

Last year, B.E.A.T.S. held a benefit fundraiser at Sonora Creek that included a silent auction, barbecue dinner, pony rides and a band featuring Mary Frankel’s husband, Steve. The event raised \$10,000 and all of the proceeds went back to the six scholarships offered in 2003. Bethany is working on plans for a 2004 fundraiser and may ask companies or individuals for a one-year scholarship or therapy horse sponsorship.

Having worked in a clinical setting and in a hippotherapy environment, Bethany has found that hippotherapy and therapeutic riding students achieve more results in a shorter period of time.

“ I could see how much more they were getting from the horse,” she says. “They don’t think of it as therapy.”

The benefits also extend beyond physical abilities to emotional benefits.

“ You see the kids light up because they can ride with their brother or sister,” Bethany explains. “They’re out there doing what their friends are doing – or they’re doing something their friends can’t do.”

A Full Agenda

In addition to lessons and therapeutic services, Sonora Creek maintains a full competition calendar throughout the year, traveling to about two events each month, including hunter-jumper, dressage and breed shows.

Mary also takes time from her busy schedule to coach the Centennial High School equestrian team, based in nearby Roswell, Georgia. The team takes weekly lessons and travels to Interscholastic Equestrian Association shows throughout the region, trying to earn points and qualify for the championship shows.

Sonora Creek students have received numerous accolades over the years. A handful of Mary’s disabled riders have competed at the Special Olympics World Games, Young Riders and the Festival of Champions, winning gold, silver and bronze medals at some events.

Rescued horses sometimes arrive at Sonora Creek, looking for a new start. Mary says she enjoys finding and unlocking horses’ potential.

“ I like to see a horse become a horse that someone may actually want,” she says. “If I can make them safe for a beginner rider, that’s all I care about.”

With her hands involved in so many programs, Mary Frankel and the Sonora Creek family are nothing short of busy. But that’s O.K. for everyone, because touching lives and making a difference is the most important item on the agenda. Perhaps Bethany says it best; “There are so many rewards. They’re countless!”

In the Feed Bin

Seminole Feed products have a standard place in the Sonora Creek feed room. Mary Frankel explains that about 12 older lesson horses, many more than 25 years old, receive about 3 ½ to 4 ½ pounds of Seminole Senior Formula at each feeding. Since she began feeding Seminole products, Frankel has noticed amazing results, including increased weight gain and coat bloom.

“Their coats are magnificent,” she said. “I don’t give hardly any other supplements.”

Mary also feeds Seminole's crimped oats to her young horses and some rescue horses.

Sonora Creek has an individualized feeding program for boarded horses, meaning they feed what the horse is accustomed to getting. All horses are fed twice daily and receive a mixture of timothy-alfalfa-orchard hay. Horses also receive daily turnout time whenever possible.

For more information about Sonora Creek, visit www.sonorafarms.com.

Freelance writer Jessica Bieber is a senior at Texas Tech University and will graduate in May 2004 with her degree in agricultural communications. She has been involved in the equine industry for 15 years as a member of 4-H horse clubs, American Horse Publications, Intercollegiate Horse Show Association and the Southwest Hunter and Jumper Association. Jessica owns a 10-year-old Thoroughbred mare and competes mainly in equitation and jumper events.