

Children of deployed service members get free riding lessons at Rancho St. Francis

By Rachel McGrath

Thursday, October 8, 2009

Thomas Keen couldn't contain his joy as he rode his horse around the ring at Rancho St. Francis, a 27-acre spread in Thousand Oaks owned by the Hogan Family Foundation.

The 8-year-old, whose father, Zackary, is a Navy Seabee serving in Afghanistan, wore a large grin as he walked and trotted along on the Arabian horse called Merlyn, following instructions from ranch manager Meaghan Shaffer.

Thomas was taking his second riding lesson and confessed he was a little nervous about horses initially but was now delighted. "I feel quite proud, because I am actually being able to ride a horse," said Thomas at the end of his lesson. "I think my dad will be proud."

Thomas and his sister, Anela, 6, are among children from nine families of deployed military personnel who were the first to take up the offer of free riding lessons from the Hogan Family Foundation.

"They're out getting exercise and fresh air and learning how to deal with horses," said mom Kristina Keen, 30, of Oxnard. It's something her kids wouldn't be able to do if not for the foundation, she said.

At Rancho St. Francis, in an area off West Potrero Road offering stunning views, the Hogans offer free lessons in riding and horse care to economically disadvantaged children, troubled teens, adults with mental challenges, and battered women through several nonprofit groups and organizations in Ventura County. Almost all of the 35 horses have themselves been rescued and rehabilitated, said Glenn Hogan, who oversees the programs with father Ed Hogan.

"I think horses are incredible therapists," Shaffer said as she instructed Thomas to remove Merlyn's ankle boots before the horse was put back in his stall. "It's a great chance for the kids to make a connection with an animal and forget about anything else that is going on and escape for the hour they are here."

Ed Hogan, who established the foundation after selling his travel business, Pleasant Hawaiian Holidays, said he has wanted to do something for the children of military personnel on active duty overseas for some time, but it has taken two years to

negotiate the red tape. Now, they're hoping more military families will come forward and participate in the riding program. The only requirement is paperwork showing a parent is on active deployment and a signed liability waiver.

For Emily Madsen, 5, her first time on a horse last month appeared to be just about the best thing ever.

"I did it. I am awesome," she shouted at her mom as she successfully pulled off a maneuver.

Edith Madsen, whose husband, Sean, is in Spain with Seabee Battalion 3 on his way to a deployment in Africa, said she found out about the program through Fleet and Family Support Services at Naval Base Ventura County.

"She's been wanting to ride since she was 3," Madsen said. "There are not too many nice things that come along with deployment. I mean, pretty much everything is horrible with deployment. So when we found out about this, it was just a big thing — like, you know, because Daddy's gone, we get to do this very special thing."

For more information on the program, call 480-3039, visit <http://www.ranchostfrancis.org> or e-mail info@ranchostfrancis.org.



© 2009 Scripps Newspaper Group — Online