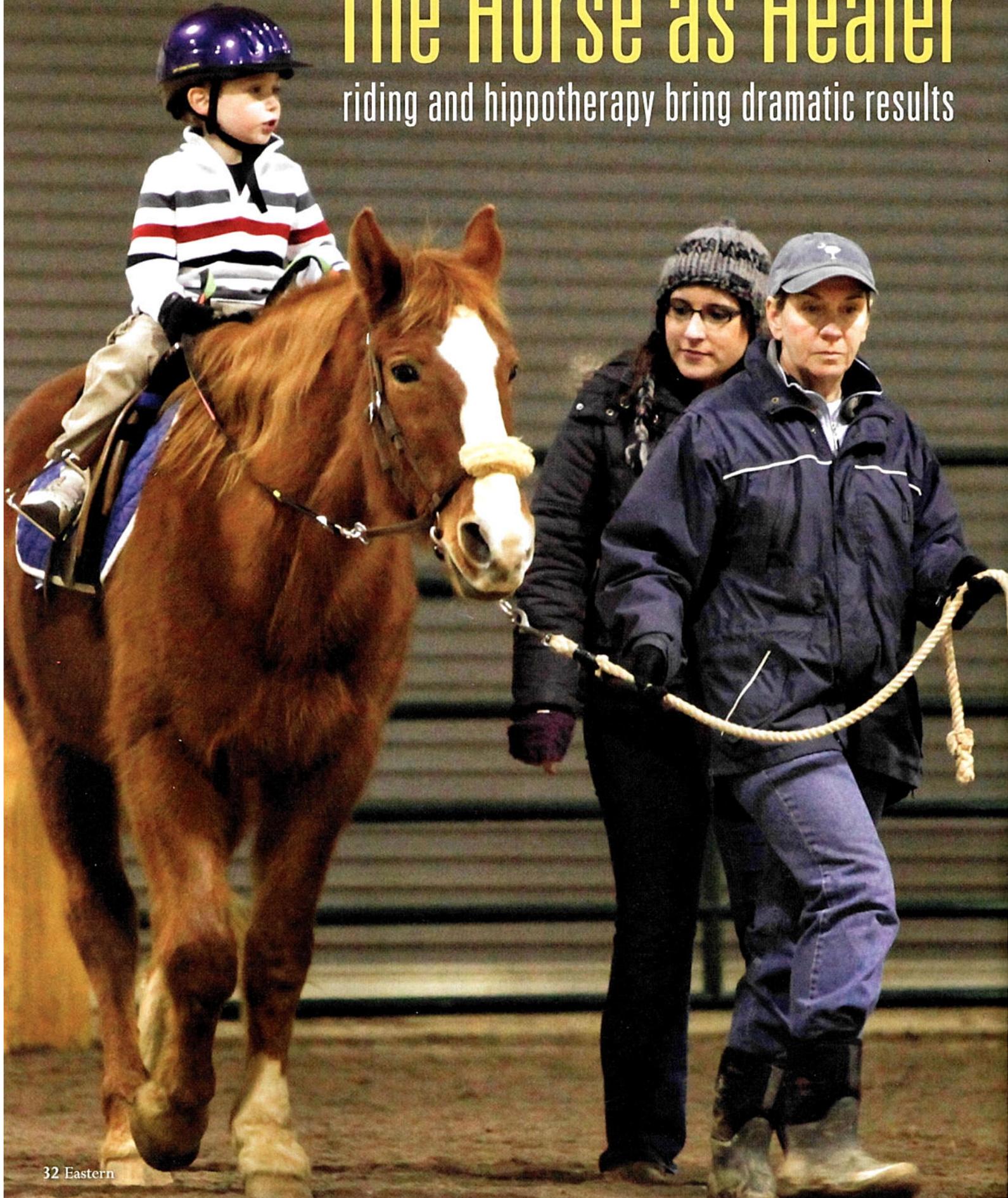


# The Horse as Healer

riding and hippotherapy bring dramatic results



The Kentucky Department of Agriculture ranks horses and mules as the state's major agricultural product, generating more than \$1 billion in annual revenues or 27% of all farm revenues. Dr. Bruce Pratt, professor of agriculture, lists the varied uses of the equine population: racing, show, pleasure and work, but adds that in Kentucky, as throughout the United States, "most horses are companion animals." We keep them because we bond with them, because they bring comfort, pleasure and enjoyment. Students and colleagues of Kathy Splinter-Watkins, associate professor in Eastern's department of occupational therapy (OT), champion another role for horses: they are healers. The results, says Pratt, are dramatic.

In her Equine Assisted Activity course and service learning program at Central Kentucky Riding for Hope stables in Lexington, Splinter-Watkins gives OT students hands-on experience with a powerful, low-tech treatment option for an astonishing range of physical, cognitive, neurological and psychological conditions:

- Amputation
- Arthritis
- Autism
- Behavioral issues
- Cerebral palsy
- Depression
- Developmental delay
- Down syndrome
- Eating disorders
- Heart conditions
- Learning and language disabilities
- Multiple sclerosis
- Paraplegia
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Spina bifida
- Stroke
- Traumatic brain injury

"Equine-assisted activity" comprises two treatment modes: therapeutic riding and hippotherapy. Both use carefully selected and trained, patient, even-gaited, "bomb-proof" horses. Therapeutic riding builds on the emotional bonds between horse and rider, developing confidence, self-esteem, responsibility, care-giving and communication skills as well as exposure to a wide range of physical, tactile and emotional stimuli. Hippotherapy harnesses the rhythmic, repetitive, variable movement of the horse to simulate the rider's central nervous system. The three-dimensional movement of the horse's pelvis, explains Splinter-Watkins, is similar to that of the human pelvis, stimulating normal movement patterns. The warmth of the horse and leg grip of the rider reduces spasticity while improving muscle strength, posture, balance and gait.

Since undeniably the most even-gaited horse is not as predictable as, for instance, a treadmill, patients learn the subtle adjustments of balance and coordination necessary for activities of daily life. Numerous professionally controlled studies confirm results. Not that hippotherapy is new. Greek writings from 460 B.C. record the healing power of horses. Modern clinical recognition began in the 1950s, when Danish polio survivor Lis Hartel won Olympic medals in dressage, crediting riding with her dramatic recovery from nearly complete paralysis.

Like Splinter-Watkins, most therapeutic riding instructors are certified by the North American Handicapped Riders Association. However, hippotherapy can be practiced only by licensed physical, occupational or speech therapists. Splinter-Watkins is one of Kentucky's three designated Hippotherapy Clinical Specialists® (HPCS). Encouraged by the passionate enthusiasm of her OT students and hoping to position them with nationally recognized credentials, Splinter-Watkins has proposed a program offering a graduate certificate in hippotherapy that would lead to HPCS qualification.

Students now begin with classroom instruction and are then put in treatment teams at the newly refurbished indoor-outdoor Central Kentucky Riding for Hope stables. Flanking each mounted patient as "sidewalkers," they provide encouragement and safety under the direction of certified therapists. Recent cases included a four-year-old girl who could not walk because the two sides of her brain did not communicate normally. "She took her first steps with us," remembers Splinter-Watkins. OT students hear language- and learning-delayed children speak their first words on horseback or finally grasp basic math principles ("How many steps does Mickey take to get to the post? If he goes twice?"). Children with behavior issues follow directions ("Walk to the post and turn left"). The thrill of having a 1,000-pound animal respond to commands bolsters self-esteem. When trauma left a 19-year-old with selective mutism, healing commenced as she began speaking with her sidewalkers. Those with autism who typically resist new textures are charmed by the soothing, other-directed grooming of a miniature horse.

OT student Samantha Klema came from a riding background that helped her overcome learning disabilities. She watched hippotherapy help a brother with cerebral palsy develop confidence and improved muscle control. Now he is in college and showing family horses in a specially designed cart. At Eastern, Klema admires Splinter-Watkins' "soft-spoken, kind and gentle way" and will "definitely" get hippotherapy and riding therapy certification. Other children can be cruel to those with handicaps, Klema knows, but a horse doesn't judge or ridicule. In just a few sessions she has seen palpable differences in her patient's gait, manner and attitude. "She stood straighter. She was involved." Graduate student Keisha Gayheart has watched riding therapies help children with learning and language disabilities develop concentration, patience and social skills, sharing thoughts and emotions with their horse. She is excited by the promise of these therapies for adults and plans to apply her skills in rural Perry County, Ky. Eastern's OT curriculum brought Brittany Walker from Ohio; she is excited by the program's mix of results and fun for therapy-weary patients.

Like these students, Kathy Splinter-Watkins had a deep, immediate attraction to the field. A lifelong horse enthusiast, she wanted a change from bio-medical research and followed up on a blurb she read about a therapeutic riding program. "It was everything I ever wanted: social, emotional, physical, and it appealed to the service side of me." After becoming an occupational therapist, she decided to "try out academia" with a 1989 appointment at Eastern and liked what she found. In addition to a full teaching load, she volunteers with Central Kentucky Riding for Hope, regularly commuting to Lexington to support programs like "Healing Hooves," a therapeutic retreat for young people grieving the loss of a loved one.

Mounting clinical evidence spurs insurance companies to support therapeutic riding and hippotherapy, notes Dr. Louisa DeBolt of Eastern's exercise and sport science department, whose course in disability sports introduces students to a spectrum of treatment and recreation options. Both DeBolt and Splinter-Watkins see broad adult applications: amputees, stroke and trauma victims, paraplegic and arthritic patients, those with heart conditions, multiple sclerosis, as well as veterans suffering PTSD. Age is no barrier. A current client is in her eighties. Sidewalkers range from 14 to 70 with varying degrees of riding experience. One certainty unites students, volunteers and therapists: they want to be there when a wounded veteran first saddles his own horse or a child who has never spoken whispers, "Walk on, Mickey, walk on."