

Breaking Barriers

everybody belongs • everybody serves

Church bulletin edition

(additional articles online, www.rca.org/disability)

Life-Giving Recreation

by Stephen Hielkema

RCA minister and hospice chaplain, Gahanna, OH

Our son Tommy was born 19 years ago with cri-du-chat syndrome, a genetic disability that, along with cerebral palsy, significantly impairs his ability to ambulate and to express himself verbally. He can get over-stimulated easily and become aggressive, so every day we are challenged in some way as we care for and love him. But it's getting better each day.

What has been most helpful for Tommy is his interaction in the community. While he has difficulty expressing himself, his receptive and perceptive skills are very strong. He is an outgoing and gregarious young man. Tommy attends high school in our local public school system in a self-contained classroom that is anything but contained. Throughout the week students participate in community outings, school services (his class runs a breakfast service and a lunch counter for the school), and every day typically functioning students spend their free time interacting and leading activities with Tommy and his classmates. Through outings, work experiences, and interaction with peers, Tommy has grown considerably in his ability to participate with less over-stimulation and more confidence.

Tommy's classroom has laid an excellent foundation, enabling him to enjoy relationships with peers and experience the delight and fun that comes from recreational activities. Over the years Tommy has participated in soccer, hippo-therapy, aqua-therapy, and overnight camps; Special Olympics track, bowling, and swimming; and lately in the Miracle League (www.miracleleague.com). These recreational activities have been for Tommy exactly what recreational activities are for anyone — life giving. He gets to be part of a team, meet new people, tell stories as only he knows how, laugh, love, and be loved. It hasn't always been easy. He still has periods when he struggles, but he is maturing as he engages the world and the people around him.

It would have been easy, especially in the earlier years, not to venture forth and to stay cloistered in our home, but I am glad there were individuals who cared enough for Tommy to provide opportunities for his whole person (body, soul, mind, and spirit).

Themes

Summer 2013 — Recreation. This special bulletin-insert edition explores the impact of disability on recreational activities.

Fall 2013 — Veterans. How has your church been impacted by veterans living with conflict-related disabilities such as post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, or other injuries? Please send us your story by August 16.

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Therapy Riding as Ministry

by Ben and Melissa Conner, Holland, MI*

Therapeutic horsemanship offers a supported, safe environment where individuals with physical, mental, and emotional challenges can reap the benefits of developing a relationship with a horse.

Research shows that the benefits of riding are numerous: core muscles are strengthened from the multi-dimensional movement of horseback riding, cognitive function is stimulated, motor planning is enhanced, endorphins are released leading to increased confidence, vocabulary is often improved, and the rider experiences a sense of accomplishment and connection to creation that is larger than self.

This all takes place within the context of a community where the activity is supported by trained volunteers who serve as horse handlers and side walkers under the supervision of a certified instructor (and a trained therapeutic riding horse). Through this activity — with elements of risk, adventure, trust, friendship, accomplishment, teamwork, and ultimately success — ministry is taking place that churches can learn from.

When individuals are dignified by being recognized as riders instead of, primarily, people with disabilities, a shift in perception and identity is occurring and a culture that creates a space for positive changes in self-image and family and peer relations is being nurtured.

Everyone who participates — riders, volunteers, family, staff — is confronted by the same challenges and possibilities associated with communication, inclusion, affirmation, and correction that churches need in order to be complete. A hospitable church recognizes that the body of Christ has disabilities and that the absence of persons with disabilities reduces our quality of life and diminishes our witness.

If there is a therapeutic riding center near you, get involved. Notice how students are welcomed and addressed using person-first language (the first taste of hospitality people receive is in the way we address them). If this is not the same welcome they would receive at your church, consider inviting your entire congregation to visit the riding center.

*Ben is associate professor of Christian discipleship at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, MI, and Melissa is Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International certified advanced instructor, evaluator, and site visitor (friendshipfarmholland@gmail.com).

Editor's Note

A Determined Vision

Scott Lacey always has been competitive and athletic, but three years ago when he suddenly lost his vision a week before his 27th birthday, he found himself at a new starting point in life. Born with hydrocephalus, a shunt inserted a year after birth was problem-free for 26 years. But six months of headaches and blurry vision came to a head on April 20, 2010, while driving to Muskegon, MI.

“Suddenly my vision was gone,” Lacey recalls. “Six hours later during brain surgery they found the shunt had stopped working.”

Eight subsequent brain and two optic nerve surgeries failed to recover his sight. “I didn’t know what I’d do. I did not have the skill set or mobility or anything to function as a blind person.”

He spent four and a half months with the Commission for the Blind in Kalamazoo, MI, learning the Braille system and skills to function in everyday life. Still, as recently as two years ago, “I couldn’t walk up a flight of stairs because my muscles had atrophied after a long stretch of inactivity in the hospital.”

Lacey soon took up running, first on a treadmill, then on a track, then outdoors using a white cane. Last spring, tethered to Lance Brown, a childhood friend from Fellowship Reformed Church in Holland, MI, he completed the 15.5-mile Old Kent River Bank Run in Grand Rapids in less than 2 hours, 17 minutes (nearly 30 minutes faster than the previous year, when Lacey ran the same race on his own, relying on a white cane). Today, Lacey and Brown are in training for the October 20 Grand Rapids Marathon, hoping their time will qualify them for the blind/visually impaired division of the Boston Marathon.

—*Terry A. DeYoung*

More Online

At www.rca.org/disability, read more articles from the Summer 2013 issue of *Breaking Barriers*:

- Through a grant, people with disabilities enjoy a day at Joy Ranch summer camp in South Dakota.
- An Iowa pastor who has lost most of his vision continues to enjoy his favorite hobby of woodworking.
- A west Michigan church hosts Treasure Camp for young people with disabilities.

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