



Heaven's Gait Ranch, Inc. Therapeutic Riding Center

December 2, 2024

Dear Family and Friends,

The holiday season reminds us of all our blessings to be grateful, and you remain at the top of our list. When you kindly reached out this year, asking how we were doing, juggling work at the ranch and life with little kids, you already knew the answer. You already knew what it's like to be in the thick of it, learning to let go while also trying to maintain control. You already knew the struggle and desire to build your own family while holding onto the one who raised you. Not to mention, learning when it's time to push and when it's time to rest. Boy, did you know.



After having our first child, I admit, I couldn't fathom how we could love another human being just as much. With fewer resources of coveted time and energy, how could we do it again, as well as we did the first time? How could our hearts divide and conquer? Yet, when our daughter arrived last winter, we learned how love could multiply and stretch even stronger than ever.

That's why when HGR lost three program horses this year, two of whom were "originals" we couldn't imagine operating without, you knew what kind of hole that would leave in our hearts, as well as what kind of void that would create in our community. After these horses provided a collective 2,566 lessons to those in need, you showed us that searching for more didn't mean we appreciated "the originals" any less. In fact, loving them so much showed us how badly we wanted to do it again. How beautiful the time was that we shared, how quickly we wanted to keep their memory alive, and how intentional we needed to be to create new, positive experiences for the next generation evolving rapidly right in front of us.

There's something to be said about falling in love all over again, and we'd argue, it's very much a matter of choice. Thank you for choosing to fall in love with our mission, over and over again. For falling in love with a new herd while remaining committed to the seniors who set such a high bar of success. For finding new ways to relate to our mission every year, whether it's because you have a child in your family with special needs or you have an aging adult in your home with disabilities. For dusting your boots off every morning when that person might even be yourself. For humbly choosing to help another when they're hurting because you know how hard recovery can be. And for understanding that encouraging "individuals with special needs and veterans with disabilities" means supporting families exactly like yours and mine.

You are the family setting our standard. You are the family choosing to keep living the dream despite cancer, dementia, depression, or addiction... Multiple Sclerosis, Parkinson's, Down Syndrome, or Autism... walkers, wheelchairs, hearing aids, or life alerts. You are the family who shows us how love strengthens and multiplies when blessed with preemies, angel babies, grandparents, and good "neigh"- bors.

Thank you for choosing to make a difference every day, year after year, and thank you for choosing to support Heaven's Gait Ranch heading into year nine. In eight years, you've provided over 8,000 lessons to our community, and with your continued financial support of our equine assisted services, we can't wait to do it again.

Wishing you a happy, healthy holiday season, and we look forward to seeing you in 2025!

Sincerely,

Margaret Mary & Brian McClaren
Co-Founders

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Therapeutic Riding Center

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Progress... One Step at a Time

At seven years old, Mathias climbed aboard our old friend Jack – with much reluctance – until he gained a new perspective. Since joining programming in the spring of 2019, his hesitation in new environments made everything about therapeutic riding initially challenging — but ultimately rewarding.

“I was nervous that he would never actually get on the horse,” says Mathias’ dad, Mo. “He spent a lot of [time] just being around the horse and getting used to the helmet.”

In fact, for weeks Mo would drive over an hour – one way – to Heaven’s Gait Ranch only to have his son express fears of putting on a helmet. Because that’s safety step one before approaching the horse, we worked through those fears in the family room, with a lot of patience and persistence from both father and son.

One sensory step at a time, his instructor herself would put on a helmet, explaining how to adjust the straps around her ears and click the buckle under her chin. She’d “click” and “unclick” — “click” and “unclick” — again and again — until the sound no longer phased him. This calming repetition not only showed Mathias what to expect, but it also gave him the confidence to understand he was in control. With a gradual release of instruction, eventually Mathias put on his own helmet.

Next came the mounting ramp.

Role playing mounts and dismounts with his team of volunteers, we’d get “on the horse” and “off the horse” — “on the horse” and “off the horse” — all while Jack stood patiently in the chute. Knowing good things come to those with a plan and a positive attitude, Jack was the perfect horse to introduce Mathias to the joy of riding, and more importantly, the satisfaction of overcoming his fears. With consistency and dedication, the young man’s confidence grew. His first ride out of the mounting ramp was three steps, which Mathias and his volunteers counted aloud together. The next week, he took five steps. Then seven. Then ten. Then fifteen. Eventually, Mathias and Jack made a full lap around the indoor arena.



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Over time, he would learn to let go of the handle on the bareback pad and desire to pick up his reins. He would learn to find his own balance and put his feet in his stirrups. He would take the opportunity to ride sideways and backwards, playing around the world with other riders in his class. All of these experiences would teach him how to develop a sense of trust in his horse and also trust in himself.

Now, Mathias has conquered his fears of riding other horses in the outdoor arena, as well as riding his favorite horse, Frost, along the trail — an impressive feat for anyone without walls or barriers to control his environment. With so much to be proud of, Mathias is still setting new goals for himself.

"I'd like to learn to ride without a leadwalker," says Mathias.

Over the past five years, Mathias has made consistent strides towards independence, while meeting physical, social, and emotional goals. Mathias can now groom, tack, and mount his horse with minimal assistance. He stays centered on his horse and is able to stop and steer accurately.

Currently, Mathias only needs the assistance of a leadwalker and one sidewalker, and rarely does he need physical assistance from his side walker. Nevertheless, verbal encouragement and positive reinforcement continue to make all the difference when he tries something new.

Admittedly anxious in loud and crowded places, Mathias has also increased his frustration tolerance by moving from private lessons to riding in a small group. He continues to stretch his comfort zone at HGR, so much so that he can now apply the same approach to learning in other safe and encouraging environments. This year, Mathias even took a role in his school play adaptation of *Moana*, where he sang and danced with his schoolmates.

"It was a big step for him," says Mo. "I didn't know if he was going to enjoy it; the lights, sounds, and costumes can be a lot of stimulation for him. But he did great!"

Every week, Mathias inspires other participants, volunteers, and staff to persevere by focusing on slow, steady, incremental progress.



**"HGR has taught Mathias that courage isn't about being fearless," his father says.
"It's about taking that first step."**

Mathias has accomplished so much since joining our therapeutic riding program, and we are excited to see more of his success evolve in 2025!



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Rebuilding is tough, but your renewed commitment to our cause will create even more opportunities for others to grow in our community. ‘

Thank you for making it possible for us to have another hard working herd heading into year nine. Your support and spirit of giving this holiday season will determine our impact in 2025 and beyond.

How You Can Help HGR in 2025 & Beyond

1. Sponsor a Rider & Support our Programs — Sponsor a veteran or participant with special needs for \$1,200 per season. When you sponsor someone in need, you provide healing and a path to recovery. You provide reflection after a fight with family. You provide peace after losing a loved one. Motivation after a surgery. Movement after feeling sedentary. Most importantly, you elevate someone's quality of life, week after week.
2. Sponsor a Stall & Support our Herd — Thank you for helping us purchase three new program horses in 2024! Although all nine of HGR's equines are pledged to be sponsored in 2025 for seasonal veterinary care & hoof trims, we are looking for eight stall sponsors in 2025. By sponsoring a stall for \$2,000, you will not only help us employ a person and enhance their well being, but you will also provide HGR's herd with daily necessities outside of lessons. The true cost of reliable care extends beyond the increasing cost of raw goods; it requires human hands to physically provide their basic needs.
3. Consider a Corporate Matching Gift — Many businesses offer matching donations. Does your employer care about health and human services, education, military veterans, or animals? Ask your employer today, advocate on our behalf, or let us know if this is an option, and we'd be happy to connect.
4. Make a Memorial Donation – Did you know that you can honor a loved one, two or four-legged, by making a donation of any size in memory of a family member or friend? After all, that's how Heaven's Gait Ranch got started! In recent years, we've received a higher number of memorial donations which is such a beautiful way to keep their spirit alive. Please tell us their stories – who they were, what they stood for, what they did, and why you've chosen to support our mission on their behalf. It's a blessing to see the ripple effect you create in our community!
5. Leave a Legacy & Help HGR Build an Endowment — Planning for the future and creating the legacy you wish to leave is one of the most effective ways to ensure a lasting impact. Making a gift to Heaven's Gait Ranch, Inc. in your will or living trust can guarantee that your legacy endures. EIN: 81-1274623.

Text to Give: (920) 315-7551 using the keyword: horses. When you text "horses" to (920) 315-7551, you'll receive a link to access a secure platform, GiveCentral. Here, you can make a one-time or recurring donation.

As a small nonprofit, working to make a big difference, we will remember you!