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COMMUNITY

## Giant Steps for all



Giant Steps volunteer Heather Ellingson talks to Shiloh, a horse at the therapeutic equestrian center near Petaluma. The Sonoma Valley High senior, who has been riding since she was 4, helps riders by side-walking with the animals during sessions. JEFF KAN LEE / The Press Democrat

**Therapeutic equestrian center  
builds confidence in special-  
needs riders, volunteers**

By RAYNE WOLFE  
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There are a lot of smiles at Giant Steps in Petaluma. Riders with developmental, physical or emotional challenges often grin when they master new skills.

The trainers and volunteers smile when they witness moments of intense courage. And some days, it seems like even the docile Tennessee walking horses are beaming.

Founded in 1998 and tucked into the rolling hills west of Petaluma, the

nonprofit therapy program matches a stable of trained horses with about 200 volunteers who work as side-walkers or leaders for about 50 special-needs riders. Another 50 potential riders are on a waiting list.

Instructors certified by the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association lead small groups six days a week.

Seventeen-year-old Sonoma Valley High senior Heather Ellingson has been volunteering at Giant Steps since last summer, when her dad told her to get up off the couch and do something worthwhile.

"He told me to get a job or volunteer. I wasn't offended. I saw his point. Last summer, I was either playing tennis or lying around," she said.

The high school tennis whiz had been riding horses since she was about 4, when her grandmother arranged for lessons. So she searched for "horses" and "volunteering" on the Internet. Up came Giant Steps.

"At first I was a little nervous. But I had had a friend in grammar school who had Down syndrome, so I wasn't afraid or anything. I quickly learned that the whole program

is just about helping," Ellingson said.

Many teens apply to Giant Steps. Not all stay. "It's not hard to interest a teenage girl in horses," said Robert Pope, executive director of Giant Steps. "But if they come just for the horses, they're not going to last." He said he's impressed with Ellingson's commitment.

"Heather is just so dependable. Anytime she comes, she stays all day. And she does everything she's supposed to," he said.

Volunteer side-walkers assure rider safety. Safety precautions rule each session. Riders can mount horses using steps or platforms or a green metal mechanical lift for those in wheelchairs. In the saddle, riders do exercises, lifting legs and arms for several beats, which increases their balance and core strength.

On a recent foggy morning, Mary Hernandez of Healdsburg was there to watch her 38-year-old daughter, Kelly, who has been riding at Giant Steps for about four years. "It is so fantastic that these volunteers come all the way out here to help. My daughter used to be afraid of everything. She was afraid of birds. For her to be on a horse is amazing to us. It's helped her build her confidence so much," Hernandez said.

Pope said the trick to volunteer longevity is finding individuals who love horses as much as they love helping people. When that happens, he says, it's magic. "We see miracles all the time. I remember a 40-year-old developmentally disabled man who had never spoken a word in his life, suddenly saying 'horse.' There are profound connections between people and horses," he said.

As the riders develop skills, so do the volunteers, according to Ellingson. "I was pretty shy when I came out here and now I can talk to anyone. This work has built my confidence so much," she said. Ellingson's volunteering has greatly influenced her college and career plans. She has been visiting campuses that have civil engineering and agriculture departments that include equine studies.

She's leaning toward Stanford, where her father and grandfather went. She said she wants to become a civil engineer specializing in the design of equestrian facilities. "I want to build green and solar-powered equestrian facilities. I love engineering and I love puzzles and I love horses," she said.

To learn more about Giant Steps, visit [www.giantstepsriding.org](http://www.giantstepsriding.org) or call the office at 769-8900.

Tickets are still available for the group's annual music gala fund-raiser, Stepping Out, which will take place next Sunday at Atwood Ranch in Glen Ellen. Live bands include Commander Cody and Dan Hicks & The Hot Licks.

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