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Therapeutic horses, clients get more space

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WAUCONDA – Before Vinnie Licocci began riding horses, he didn't talk.

Over time working with horses at [Partners for Progress](#) helped the 17-year-old with disabilities become more verbal and comfortable in social situations, said his mom Sally Licocci.

"It helped him to communicate with other people," Sally said. "He's listening to what's happening in the arena and responding."



Mike Mathews watches his son Mike, 31, who is developmentally challenged, take a riding lesson in Partners For Progress' new Wauconda facility June 29. (Cassandra Dowell – cdowell@shawmedia.com) WAUCONDA – Before

Now her son has even more room at Partners for Progress to ride and communicate.

Partners For Progress, a nonprofit that offers equine therapy for those with disabilities – including Down syndrome, autism and cerebral palsy – moved in June to its new location at 23525 W. Milton Road in Wauconda. Partners For Progress was previously located at an equine veterinary clinic in Mundelein, and searched for two years to find a place to expand.

On the new 10-acre equine haven, children and adults with special needs are enhancing their social, motor and vocational skills by riding and working with horses.

Diane Helgeland, executive director of Partners For Progress, said the organization is launching a capital campaign to raise about \$2.5 million to purchase the property and expand programming. She said the property is being leased until the necessary funds are raised.

"This is a dream come true," Helgeland said. "We can now do everything under one roof."

Mike Mathews, Sr. looked on through the new facility's viewing and lounge area June 29 as his son, Mike, 31, who is developmentally challenged, practiced riding in the indoor arena.

"It's just beautiful here," said Mathews, Sr. of the new location, adding that his son has been riding with the program for about six years. "The new space makes it easier for us [parents] to watch and help out." Partners For Progress serves about 170 people with special needs weekly and has about 20 specially trained horses.

Linda Liss, director of development for Partners For Progress, said the new space will allow the organization to build a more efficient therapy room, offer more room for the horses both in housing and play space and is overall more disability friendly.

"In our past facility we had just a fraction of the size to work with [participants]," Liss said. "We could only have one client at a time in the therapy room. Now we can service more clients at the same time by offering direct treatment."

During one-on-one therapy sessions clients work with occupational therapists by performing different activities and working on speech, she said. The one-on-one therapy complements the equine therapy clients receive. The horse stable and aisles between the stalls is also larger than before, said Anne Margaret Huffman, office assistant for Partners For Progress.

"Before [clients] couldn't do a lot of grooming," Huffman said. "Now even kids in wheelchairs and walkers can participate [in every aspect] of being with the horses. They can learn vocational skills. Some have become part-time employees. Our therapy creates that fully functioning person that is earning a wage and doing things."

Liss said riders use therapeutic riding pads while on the horse that cater to his or her individual needs.

"The adaptive equipment on the horse allows riders to ride backwards, or lay on their stomach while on the horse," Liss said. "That changes every muscle group being used. While riding they work on eye contact and verbal communication – they're experiencing how it looks, smells and feels."

Vinnie Licocci is one of the organization's many success stories. Helgeland said she remembers when his mother, Sally, called her, crying with joy.

"She told me that Vinnie had asked to ride a certain horse, Gambler," Helgeland said. "That was the first time he had ever asked for anything."

Sally said she treasures moments like those.

"When you have a child with a disability it's the little things in life that mean so much," Sally said. "Every sign of progress is huge."

Vinnie regularly volunteers to work with other riders and even earned his horsemanship badge as a member of Boy Scouts of America.

"I like being involved with animals," Vinnie said.

Huffman's daughter, Rhiannon, 11, has autism and began working with the program at the age of 5.

"When Rhiannon first started she was low verbal and had low upper body tone," Huffman said. "But she always had an affinity for horses. We would have to stop the car when we were driving past horses just so she could look at them. She started to improve immediately and now rides with the Special Olympics."

Kelsey Weick, 21, of Hawthorn Woods seemed right at home while helping to sweep the aisle between the stalls June 29. The woman with Sotos syndrome, a genetic condition that causes rapid physical growth and can delay motor skills, said she enjoys everything about being at the stable.

"I like to ride [the horses], tacking them, showing them and practicing," Weick said.

To learn more, call 847-226-1300 or visit www.partnersforprogressnfp.org.