

Hope Youth Ranch's newest program caters to learning-disabled children



Erin Sullivan, Times Staff Writer ▼

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HUDSON — Jimmy Coleman stared up at the horse. This was his first week of kindergarten at Hope Ranch Learning Academy, a small, private school for children with learning disabilities. Equine therapy is part of the course and Jimmy, who is 5 and has autism, was terrified. The brown horse named Sox loomed huge. But Jimmy was fixated and drew closer. He leaned on the fence.

"Can we go on him today?" he asked the teacher during class Thursday. No, she said. Not today.

"Can we feed him?"

Yes, she said, and motioned to her bucket of carrots.

"Can we pet the horse today?" he asked. Yes, she said and at that, Sox walked over to Jimmy.

"Sox! Hi Sox!" Jimmy said.

He was excited, but focused and relaxed, which is one of the reasons why the Hope Youth Ranch has six horses for therapy. The ranch sits on 9 acres off of East Road, just south of the Pasco-Hernando border. It's covered with wide, breezy trees and feels far removed from urban life.

This is the third year for the school, which is financed by donations from the community and through the McKay Scholarships for Students with Disabilities Program.

The academy is housed in a small building at Hope Youth Ranch, a nonprofit that gives teen girls struggling in foster care a place to live and heal. Founder and executive director Jose Suarez said, in the beginning, he sent the residents to public schools. But his staff spent all their time dealing with discipline problems. The girls were always getting suspended.

The ranch accepts children who have been severely abused emotionally, physically and sexually, teenagers who fight and swear and cut themselves. Suarez realized that they needed to be taught on the grounds, so he opened a school in 2005. Counselors and therapists on staff. The grounds are serene. The girls connect with the horses.

While researching for the school, Suarez found there were limited choices in Pasco for parents who have children with autism. So he and his wife, Ampy Suarez, the ranch co-founder and director of education, decided to open the school to the public.

This fits in with their faith-based mission: If they see a need, they try to fill it. That's how Hope Youth Ranch began in the first place. They felt a calling to help the homeless and began feeding them, but then realized they could curb the problem by caring for people before they became adults on the streets.

They took in foster children, then found there was a need for housing for emotionally disturbed girls in foster care, the ones who bounced from home to home, seemingly broken, with no hope.

In 2009, the nonresidential school opened with one student who has autism. By the end of the year, there were four.

In 2010, 10 children were enrolled.

This year, there are 34 students — 14 residents and 20 nonresidents ranging in age from kindergarten to high school. About 80 percent of them have autism. All have learning disabilities.

Residential and nonresidential students are taught separately. Jose Suarez said he hopes to increase enrollment to 50 this year. He has five portable buildings, but recently learned the county wants \$51,870 in construction impact fees. He's trying to raise that money.

"We are providing a service that does not exist" elsewhere in the area, said Ampy Suarez.

Devin Lambke is 15 and the oldest student. This is her third year. She has Asperger's syndrome, an autistic disorder that affects social interaction.

"Before I came here I was treated like an animal," Devin said; she was physically restrained when she had outbursts.

"No one had a clue that I could actually think and talk," she said.

Devin said the individualized attention she's had at the academy made the difference. She learned how to interact socially; no insults, no swearing. She wants to write a book about autism and be an advocate. She wants people to know that autism "is not a disease."

"There's nothing wrong with it," she said. "Autism makes you awesome. It's no fun being normal."

She wants to go to college.

"They've changed everything," Devin said of her teachers at the academy.

Jimmy is one of the youngest students. At the horse fence, he flinched when Sox came over to take the carrot from his hand. He closed his fist and drew it back. But he didn't walk away. He

tried again. He was scared, but he kept his hand open and flat, as his teacher told him to do. He felt Sox's whiskers on his palm. It was thrilling.

After Sox took the carrot, Jimmy turned to the group. He felt so proud of himself.

"Let's do another one!" he said.

Times staff writer Lee Logan contributed to this story. Erin Sullivan can be reached at esullivan@sptimes.com or (727) 869-6229.



>>**Fast facts**

Hope Youth Ranch

For information, go to hopeyouthranch.org or call (727) 232-0119.

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