

The gift horse: healing disabled youth

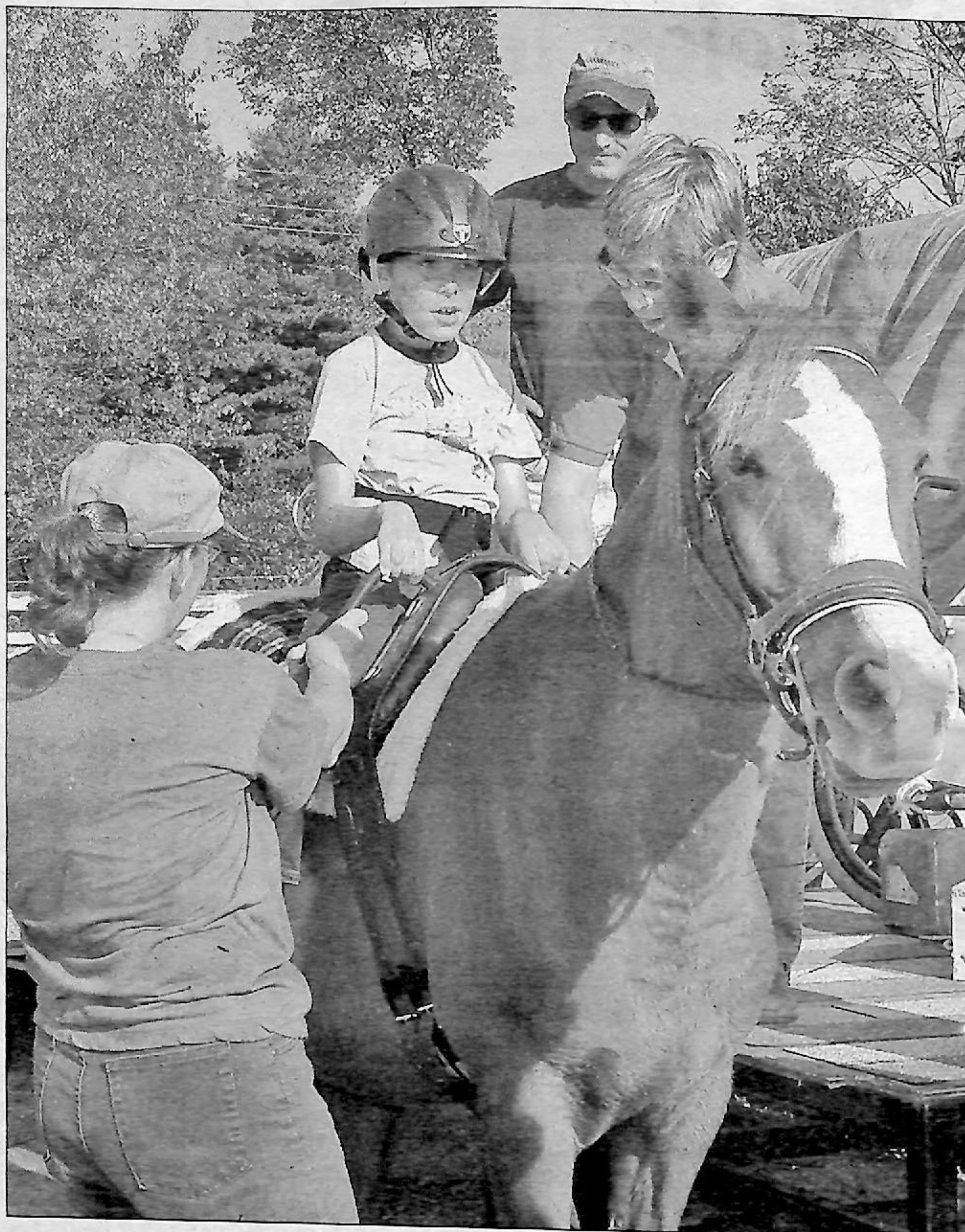
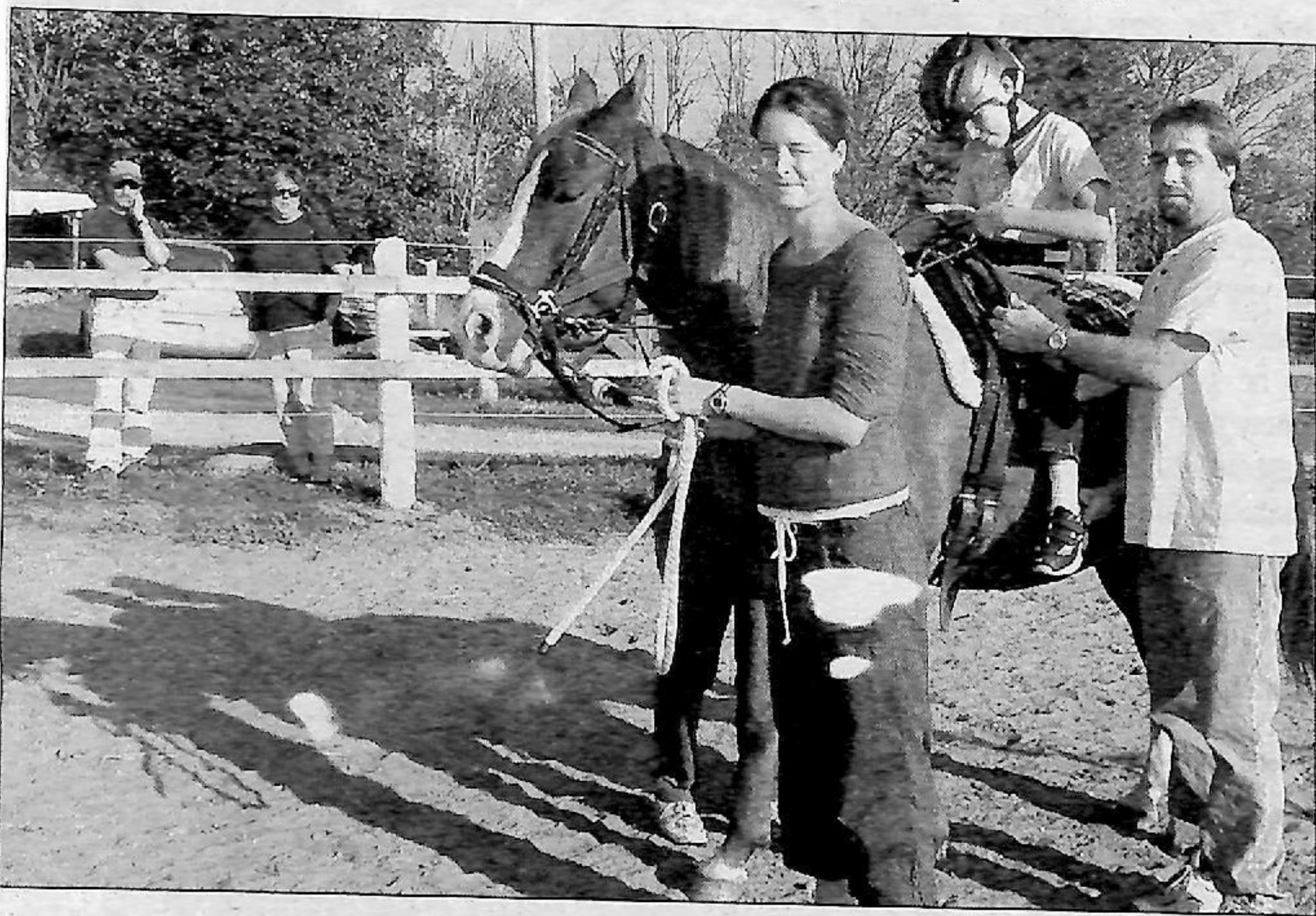
by CINDY WOODS
The Independent

The bond between humans and horses has been well-documented over many centuries. Far from being utilitarian, horses can be gentle, patient companions.

And they are playing a

major role as 'therapists' for local disabled young people. Since the Therapeutic Riding Association in Northumberland (TRAIN) began in 1993, about 30 children have gone through the program that blends therapy, horses and the disabled. These children have a range of challenges: from learning disabilities and autism to physical limitations resulting from cerebral palsy and multiple sclerosis. But as they assemble at Oakcrest Stables just south of Colborne, it's a joy to see their faces light up when they're around the horses. "I think when you see their faces, that's a miracle

in itself," explains Ellen Goodwin, who has been volunteering her time with TRAIN for nine years. "The key is that a lot of these kids are in wheelchairs, and they're always looking up at people. But when they get on a horse, suddenly, included a physiotherapist in the program in the past two years," Ms. Hazell says. "We definitely see a change in the child's attitude, the interaction with the horses and touching their mane - it gives them a sense of empowerment."



Cindy Woods photos

ABOVE LEFT: Eleven-year old Zachary Andrus is watched closely by his parents, Carla and Brian who are standing behind the fence. ABOVE RIGHT: Mounting the horse is often the most challenging aspect of therapeutic horse riding. Zachary is seen being assisted by volunteers. BELOW: Zachary sports a winning smile as he goes through the therapeutic exercises at Oakcrest Stables south of Colborne.

they're the centre of attention, and there's a boost in their confidence."

It's their own sense of accomplishment that means so much to these kids. Just mounting a horse can be a real feat.

But once they're in the ring, it's not all fun and games. Each child goes through a program of therapeutic exercises while riding the horse - exercises designed to help their motor and muscle control.

Nurse Cathy Hazell was one of three people who started TRAIN.

"Our program is more recreational than actual therapeutic. But we have



Carla and Brian Andrus of Port Hope have seen real progress in their eleven-year old son, Zachary, since he started riding.

"He's loved it from the very first day," says Mrs. Andrus. "He wasn't nervous with the horses at all."

Zachary has cerebral palsy, and hasn't been able to walk. Since he started riding last year, though, he was able to take 30 independent steps on his own.

"The riding helps his stomach muscles, and he says his legs are tired when he's been riding," Ms. Andrus explains. "But he is actually hanging onto the horse with his legs. It's great exercise."

Zachary's progress was hampered this year by seizures connected to CP, so he hasn't been riding as much this summer. Still, to see his smile as he goes through the exercises is enough to give his parents great satisfaction.

Since TRAIN is a non-profit organization, it depends on donations to stay afloat. Its Equestrian TRAIN Ride slated for Sunday, Oct. 23 is a one-and-a-half hour non-competitive pleasure ride through the Northumberland Forest. All proceeds go to costs associated with caring and boarding the horses.

For more information on the ride, call Ellen Goodwin 905-349-9955.

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