

With help from the horses, and NCEF, bright kids bloom with love

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The Naples Winter Wine Festival has had, ever since its inaugural 2001 event, a goal to help children in need and at risk in Southwest Florida. As hosts and volunteers prepare for this year, they have in mind many children could tell stories about their help has done. This is the first of three special stories from among those many children.

Diana Buchheit loved her newborn son. She reached out to hold and hug him, everyday, multiple times a day. But for six years, she never received affection in return.

She could hardly make any physical contact with her son, Joshua, now 7, without him fighting it.

“It tore me up as a mom. Since he was born, he didn’t want me to touch him,” said Buccheit, eyes filling with tears at the memory.

Now, it’s just that — a memory of how life as a family used to be — filled with challenges in communication, lack of affection and confusion on what to do.

The scene recently was a far cry from that memory, as she sat with the same child, tucked snugly under her arm. Joshua was playing a video game on a smartphone as he leaned into her.

He, along with younger brother Ezekiel, 6, and mom, sat one next to the other on the park bench at Naples Equestrian Challenge, chatting, sharing Doritos.

“When he was working with the horses, something triggered a change. He started touching more. He started being affectionate,” said Buccheit.

Joshua had been in multiple forms of therapy, as had his brother Ezekiel, including speech and occupational therapies, with few signs of improvement for the two boys, who were found to be in varying degrees on the autism spectrum, said Buccheit.

Then, after several deaths in the family and continued challenges, Buccheit found resources at the David Lawrence Center to help the entire family. Their therapies began to yield results, with Kathy Jeffcoat, a licensed mental health counselor at DLC working with all of them, offering parental advice and working with the family — not just in an office, but in the real world, in their home and watching their natural behaviors.

A grant, made possible by the Naples Winter Wine Festival, fostered a partnership between the Naples Children’s Education Foundation, David Lawrence Center and Naples Equestrian Challenge.

“My role is helping to share this potential, to allow NCEF to become the catalyst to bring these two services, DLC and Naples Equestrian Challenge, together,” said Maria Jimenez, NCEF’s director of services.

The Buchheit boys were among 14 other children benefiting from the coordination of services that pulled together an equestrian psychotherapist, trainers, horses, volunteers, and children with goal-oriented curriculum to facilitate meeting the mental issues of each of the children in the group, said Jimenez.

“Children with Asperger’s (syndrome) or with the autism spectrum (disorder), respond well with animals in general. We work to help them translate their ease in reading animal behaviors to people,” Jeffcoat said.

■ [For Freddy, there only was a world of sounds before RCMA, wine festival help \(http://www.naplesnews.com/lifestyle/wine-festival/for-freddy-there-only-was-a-world-of-sounds-before-rcma-wine-festival-help_92224930\)](http://www.naplesnews.com/lifestyle/wine-festival/for-freddy-there-only-was-a-world-of-sounds-before-rcma-wine-festival-help_92224930)

■ [With help from children's charities, family, a middle school student sees a future \(http://www.naplesnews.com/lifestyle/neapolitan/with-help-from-local-childrens-charities-and-family-a-middle-school-student-can-finally-see-his_69510036\)](http://www.naplesnews.com/lifestyle/neapolitan/with-help-from-local-childrens-charities-and-family-a-middle-school-student-can-finally-see-his_69510036)

Each of the children, whether suffering from depression or trauma or coping with autism spectrum, such as the Buchheit boys have been, experienced measurable results and behavioral improvements working with the horses and equestrian psychotherapists in the program, Jeffcoat said.

“It’s hard to describe what’s going on, but the results are phenomenal. You could see all the changes,” she said.

Joshua, who had never clearly bonded with anyone in life, saw a horse near his home shortly after the completion of the two-month program at Naples Equestrian Challenge.

“They came for me! They came for me! I knew you were coming for me,” Buccheit recalls her son exclaiming upon seeing the horses.

Ezekiel’s transformation was just as impressive, said therapists and his mother.

He went from never speaking to anyone — other than a word or two to his mother — to communicating in full sentences. The turnaround occurred in just two to three weeks with the horse therapy, something that months and years of other therapies had never accomplished.

Their behavioral changes were beyond communication and affection, although that was the beginning. Joshua had been overactive and unable to sleep. Ezekiel had been underactive and believed by everyone but his mother to be mute. Joshua would spin and spin for seemingly no reason.

The spinning stopped. The extreme energy differences were minimized. Ezekiel and Joshua are both able to fully engage in their public school education.

While mother and therapists aren’t able to fully explain how it happened — Joshua’s first bond with another being, a horse, somehow transferred to his mom, his therapist, and then to his schoolteacher.

Buccheit looks at her sons with pride.

“They’re geniuses. We need them. We need the Einsteins — people who are different than us, high functioning on the autism spectrum like Einstein. If it weren’t for the geniuses ...” Buccheit pauses.

“I should be careful calling them that,” she said, turning to her boys.

Joshua is becoming aware of his genius — perhaps overly aware, she jokes.

Jeffcoat, working for decades in therapy, is in her 60s with no indication of wanting retire. She was honored to be a part of the program and unique therapy, she said.

“You don’t always get to see your fruit, the fruit of your efforts,” Jeffcoat said, watching Joshua and Ezekiel play with one another.

Decades of work were clearly worth it. She smiled with tears in her eyes.

“Is the cost worth the benefit with programs like this? If we changed just one child, who knows? Who knows what Joshua is going to do — who his life is going to touch?”

About the festival

- **What:** Naples Winter Wine Festival, a weekend of vintner dinners, wine lot and luxury auction and a winning bidders brunch benefiting children in need through its foundation arm, Naples Children and Education Foundation. This year, the festival includes a Champagne tasting and seminar with Olivier Krug, head of the French Krug Champagne house, with guest Antonio Galloni. Since its inception in 2001, the Naples Winter Wine Festival has raised more than \$123 million for children in need.
- **When:** Various times Jan. 23 to 25; Champagne tasting at 11 a.m. Jan. 22
- **Where:** Private homes for vintner dinners; Ritz-Carlton Golf Resort, Naples, 2600 Tiburon Drive, Naples for the auction; Bleu Provence restaurant, 1234 Eighth St. S., Naples, for the Champagne tasting, seminar and lunch
- **Price:** \$8,500 per couple for the vintner dinner and auction; \$1,000 per person for the Champagne tasting (\$750 for auction ticket holders)
- **Information:** 888-837-4919 or napleswinefestival.com

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