

One Stride at a Time

Cyndee Wooley shares the incredible story of how the life of one boy was forever changed by his Naples Equestrian Challenge experience.

Zach “Zachman” Aldridge was born healthy, but at just 10 weeks old he was hospitalized at the hands of his birth father. Suffering from a brain aneurysm and multiple broken bones, little Zach wasn’t given much hope to survive. Specialists told his mother that he “might” live for a year.

His mother’s hope for a miracle was granted as the days turned into weeks, months and even years. However, the effects of shaken baby syndrome would leave the family’s version of “normal” extremely challenging on a good day. He lives with multiple physical and emotional disabilities including autism, cerebral palsy and paralysis on the left side of his body.

Zach didn’t meet the normal milestones that healthy children achieve. At the age of four, he could not walk or talk like other children his age.

With the help of her parents, Ed and Mary Jones, Rebekah Aldridge (Zach’s mom) found Naples Equestrian Challenge. After a medical evaluation, she enrolled her son in the nonprofit’s therapeutic riding program. While some doctors were resigned that Zach would remain a wheelchair user, Aldridge wanted to give her son every chance at a brighter future.

PICK A SPOT

Pick A Spot is a Leopard Appaloosa that takes great pride in his 517 spots.

Though he is smaller in stature, he has a very big heart and loves his job working with the children and families enrolled at NEC.

Foaled in 1990, Pick A Spot joined the herd at NEC in 2006 after passing a rigorous evaluation to make sure he was the right match for the job ahead of him.

Being a therapeutic riding horse is difficult and many horses aren’t up to the task. To be accepted into the program, horses go through an eight-week evaluation period to make sure that they are physically healthy and have the right personality to work with riders who have special needs.

It is important that the horses have a strong back and stable gait to compensate for carrying unbalanced riders—some that may shift sporadically



Zach’s grandfather, Ed Jones, engages Zach with a ring task.



Zach Aldridge and Pick A Spot.

or not be able to hold themselves up. Additionally, the rhythm of the horse's natural gait provides physical benefits to the rider by stimulating muscle and posture development.

Once Pick A Spot passed the usual physical evaluation, he went through a series of simulated lessons complete with a leader, sidewalkers and the typical obstacles that a horse might negotiate during a lesson. He also was introduced to the barn's safety mounting lift to ensure he wouldn't startle at the mechanical noise or motion.

DRAMATIC IMPROVEMENTS

Both Zach and Pick A Spot joined NEC in 2006. During the first lessons, Zach couldn't even hold his head up, so the riding instructors propped him up using pillows and he was supported by two very dedicated sidewalkers, his grandparents Mary and Ed.

After a few short months, the Aldridge family saw dramatic improvements. First came one of the most precious words Rebekah could hear: "Mommy." Then, Zach began telling the horse to "Trot on."

Then one of the biggest surprises of all: Zach began walking.

Between the paralysis and suffering from hip dysplasia, walking had once been impossible for Zach. With his growing strength and the gentle rocking motion provided by Pick A Spot, his hip was pushed back into place, allowing Zach to finally walk on his own.

WORKING HARD TOGETHER

A riding instructor at NEC for the past 10 years and Zach's primary instructor for the past five, Lea Haven has helped create a customized lesson plan to engage Pick A Spot and Zach to address specific physical and emotional needs.

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As a PATH International Certified Therapeutic Riding Instructor and a Certified Equine Specialist, she is well-versed in developing customized lesson plans for riders living with special needs, as well as nurturing the bond that forms between a rider and a horse.

What may seem like a simple task to most people, like picking up an item and placing it in a bucket at the end of the arena, is actually developing complex skills on many levels. First, the rider is encouraged to verbally give direction to their horse, which helps him or her improve communication skills. Then, through the motion of riding, the horse's natural gait provides a gentle rocking motion that simulates walking. In order to stabilize themselves in the saddle, the rider naturally develops muscle tone and balance.

By placing the item in a bucket, the rider is learning to focus on a task and improve fine motor skills. For an additional challenge, a side-walker might move the bucket to different positions to work different muscle groups.

Over the years, Haven has watched both Zach and Pick A Spot grow and mature together. The pony patiently works for all of his riders, but his ears definitely perk up for his friend of eight years, Zach.

When Zach is having a good day and excitedly hurries up the ramp, Pick A Spot has more energy and pushes the boy harder. But, with any physical or emotional disability, there can be bad days as well.

"Pick A Spot seems to intuitively know when Zach is a little tired, or isn't feeling good. On those days, he is calmer and easygoing for Zach," describes Haven.

Though life is filled with therapy and hard work, each week brings new challenges and accomplishments for the child who wasn't supposed to live and his spotted friend.

Cyndee Woolley, APR is an award winning consultant providing public relations, social media and community outreach strategies. She was a featured speaker at the 2011 PRSA International Conference.

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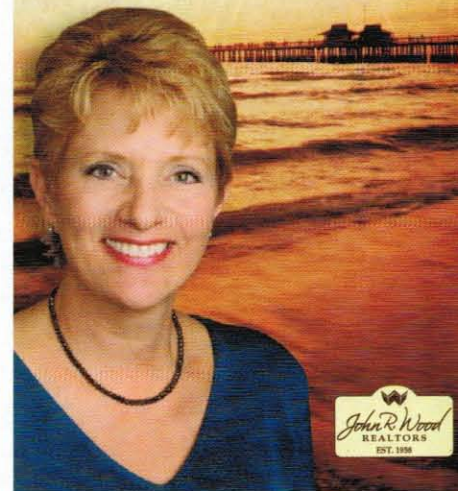


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