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Homer Glen equestrian center for children with special needs works to reopen after arena fire

Michelle Mullins

6–8 minutes

For Marlene and Art Karman, their mission is simple: Always help a child or young adult in need.

The Karmans run Holistic Riding Equestrian Therapy, a nonprofit organization in Homer Glen that offers therapeutic horseback riding and other activities to individuals with special needs. They empower individuals as young as 2 years old to see beyond their disabilities to make them stronger and more confident in their abilities.

Since incorporating as a not-for-profit in 2016, Holistic Riding Equestrian Therapy has grown to serve about 100 children and young adults each week.

In the winter months, it runs therapeutic riding sessions in its indoor arena, weather permitting.





Art Karman stands outside the indoor arena at Holistic Riding Equestrian Therapy in Homer Glen. Volunteers painted Christmas trees over the burn scars from a December fire that rendered the arena unusable. (Michelle Mullins / Daily Southtown)

Unfortunately, a December fire in the indoor arena has caused the organization to shut down its programs. A battery in a security light exploded and the sparks caught the arena's wall on fire, Art Karman said. The charred building emits an offensive odor, making it problematic for many of the program's participants who have sensory issues, he said.

The Karmans want to make the necessary electrical and insulation repairs, clean the wooden tresses and be back in operation by March, and hope donations will get them up and running again, they said.

Thankfully, the fire was contained to the indoor arena and not the stalls where their horses are kept, Marlene Karman said. No animals or people were injured.

"We just want to get past this fire, go back to our pre-fire conditions and serve everybody that needs help," she said.

The Karmans get emotional when talking of their participants,

which include individuals with autism, cerebral palsy, traumatic brain injuries, Down syndrome or those who have been severely injured in an accident. Some of the participants are in wheelchairs. Others are nonverbal. Every October, they take a group to participate in Special Olympics events.



Michael enjoys singing Whitney Houston songs to the therapy horse Holly. (Holistic Riding Equestrian Therapy)

Some of their horses also have special needs. Patton has no teeth and requires a special diet. Pregunta is blind.

"We try not to recognize labels," Marlene Karman said. "We take everybody in here as if they are able-bodied because they are able-bodied within their own skill set. We don't say disabled. We

don't say handicapped. ... You are coming to me with a clean slate. And when you raise your expectations, watch what these kids can do."

The Karmans talk about success stories, such as the time an autistic child raised his hands up in excitement and congratulated his horse after earning a Special Olympics medal or when a boy who was having frequent seizures was finally able to ride during a Special Olympics competition.

"We see one miracle after another," Art Karman said. "The amazing part is discovering the ability that they have that they never thought they had. This program is a blessing."





Chanaya shows some love to a donated Arabian gelding, Amir, at Holistic Riding Equestrian Therapy. (Holistic Riding Equestrian Therapy)

Marlene Karman, who is certified with the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International, said the connection between the children and the horses are unlike that of other animals.

"We can do things here that they can't do in a clinic environment," she said. "The power that the horse commands, the respect, the size of the animal, the ways the animal needs a human to care for them. Some of these kids this is the first time in their life they've had to be responsible for anything."

She said normally, the children they work with are the ones being taken care of, but in this program they are given control over a 1,000 pound horse.

"That changes who they feel they are. That changes who they are inside," she said. "They become confident. They have a purpose. So we're not teaching riding skills here. We are teaching life skills and self esteem."

The organization relies on volunteers.

Mauricio Lara, who has volunteered with Holistic Riding Equestrian

Therapy for seven years, said he enjoys working with the children, watching them grow and develop motor and verbal skills.

"It's pretty overwhelming to see their progress," said Lara, a Lockport resident. "A lot of them come in very shy and timid of the horses and then before you know it, as soon as they see the horses, they want to run up to them and hug them."



Marlene Karman, executive director of Holistic Riding Equestrian Therapy gives a kiss to Patton, a 29-year-old horse who they say served in four presidential inauguration parades. (Michelle Mullins / Daily Southtown)

The organization offers other learning opportunities, such as planting and harvesting vegetables and learning how to care for horses. During COVID-19 shutdowns, the farm offered educational Zoom sessions. Students with special needs from Community

High School District 218 and Homer Elementary District 33C take part in regular activities.

"We are holistic, Marlene Karman said. "We treat the body, mind, spirit, emotional, physical, cognitive, social. We treat it all. We create an environment and an opportunity for these kids to stretch themselves and grow in ways that they have no opportunity to grow in a traditional therapeutic setting."

Holistic Riding Equestrian Therapy hopes to raise \$150,000 to help with the cost of repairs to its indoor arena and is looking for electrical, HVAC or other contractors willing to donate time or services to help them reopen.

The organization has launched a [Go Fund Me](#) page, and a fundraiser will be held from 5:30-8:30 p.m. Tuesday, at Tazza Italian Ristorante, 14065 S. Bell Road, Homer Glen. The fundraiser is \$30 per person and will include a buffet dinner, cash bar, entertainment by singer John Anthony, a 50/50 raffle and an auction featuring a Bo Jackson sports package worth \$1,235.

Tickets are available at the door on a first-come basis.

For more information, go to www.holisticridingtherapy.org.

Michelle Mullins is a freelance reporter for the Daily Southtown.