

DAILY SOUTHTOWN

# New Lenox teen thrives with Homer Glen holistic therapy horse riding program



**David Withrow**

David Withrow rides with the help of his mother, Bridget, left, and Kathy Sanders, a volunteer with the Holistic Riding Equestrian Therapy program in Homer Glen. (David Withrow)



By **MICHELLE MULLINS** | Chicago Tribune

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When David Withrow was adopted at 9 ½ years old, his new parents were told he had severe autism, a severe intellectual disability, profound hearing loss and that he would not be able to communicate.

He didn't acknowledge other people existed. He didn't process spoken language. Because he couldn't communicate, he was aggressive. Without glasses, he is legally blind.

David was born premature at 23 weeks and was only 1.9 pounds.

When Bridget and Jim Withrow, of New Lenox, adopted David, he had nearly 10 years without access to sight, sounds or language, they said. While they were told he had severe autism and intellectual disabilities, they say he was misdiagnosed, although he does have a mild intellectual disability.

They began aural habilitation therapy to help him use a cochlear implant. They had to demonstrate basic activities. As he learned to communicate, his aggression began to ease, but it took time and patience, they said.

"He basically had zero background knowledge coming to us," Bridget Withrow said. "But he was a sponge. He took everything in. He was eager to learn and very curious about the world."



Michelle Mullins/for the Daily Southtown

David Withrow with his parents, Bridget and Jim Withrow. (Michelle Mullins/for the Daily Southtown)

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During the pandemic, when few activities were available, the Withrows found a horse farm in the village of Manhattan where he could participate in a safe, fun, outdoor activity.

When he outgrew that farm, they transferred to the Holistic Riding Equestrian Therapy program in Homer Glen, a not-for-profit organization which [offers therapeutic riding](#) for individuals with varied physical, emotional, cognitive and social abilities. The farm's goal is to empower individuals through horses, no matter what their abilities.

For David, the experience at the Holistic Riding Equestrian Therapy program has been transformative.

In just two years, his self-confidence and independence has soared, his mom said.

Now 17, David set a goal for himself – ride independently at this fall's Special Olympics. This is one of the first long-term goals he has ever made, his mother said.

“It’s been amazing to see his progress,” Bridget said. “It’s given us a glimpse of what he is truly capable of doing.”

David joined the Holistic Riding Equestrian Therapy program in 2022. During his first trip to the Special Olympics that year, he came home with a medal and was so excited, his parents said.



David Withrow, of New Lenox, practices riding independently at Holistic Riding Equestrian Therapy in Homer Glen. (Bridget Withrow)

“The first time out at Special Olympics, he was glowing, beaming, happy,” his mom said. “We saw him capable of so much on a horse, more so than we saw anywhere else.”

But at the Special Olympics last year, he was different. Like usual, Bridget Withrow walked beside the horse as David rode, but at these Olympics, his younger sister, Evie, participated for the first time, and Bridget walked next to her horse as well.

David then expressed the most communication his parents had ever seen. He let them know he felt as though he was being treated like a baby because his mom gave him the same help she was giving to his sister Evie.

Putting the language together to express his feelings was a huge accomplishment, his parents said.

So they vowed to help him learn how to ride independently for the Special Olympics this October.

“He doesn’t typically even comment on things, much less put forth the effort to reach a long-term goal,” Bridget said.

David now trains to ride independently. During his time at the Holistic Riding Equestrian Therapy, he has learned to follow seven- or eight-step directions when he used to follow only one- or two-step directions at school.

“To see him get on a horse and drive this several thousand pound animal around, that is just incredibly cool,” Jim Withrow said.

David has also learned to groom his horse without help and to use reining commands needed to navigate his horse through complex patterns.

“He’s always been proud of himself when he learns something new,” Bridget said.

During the Special Olympics in October, David will ride his horse in a pattern with no obstacles and then again when obstacles, such as poles, cones or gates. His mom can use sign language to help him, but she will stand next to the judge’s table, and David’s vision, even with glasses, is not very clear. But they continue to practice.

Marlene Karman, the founder and executive director at the Holistic Riding Equestrian Therapy, said these are moments to celebrate.

“There’s a very smart man trapped in his body,” Karman said. “He wants to ride independently. He shared that. The self-esteem, self-confidence wasn’t there before. He is figuring out what he wants to do.”

Karman said there's a special bond between a horse and a human that can't be replicated. A horse will relax with a person's gentle hand or touch and in turn affect the person's heart rate.

"There's a powerful energy circle," she said. "They exude peace."

For individuals who have special needs and don't have control over their lives, they can control a large, powerful horse, Karman said.

"That's a big deal," she said. "Every person comes in here gets transformed physically, emotionally, cognitively and socially. It's such a heart-warming moment. A horse's power is unconditional love, unconditional acceptance and unconditional trust. It's beautiful. There is hope no matter the disabilities, no matter the challenges."



David Withrow shows off his Special Olympics medals. (Bridget Withrow)

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In the last few years, horses have had a profound impact on David, his parents said.

They've tried to get him involved in crafts or sports, but he doesn't always show excitement. But David enjoys taking care of the horses and cleaning up after them.

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When he picked out his clothes to wear for his senior portraits, he chose his riding shirt and Special Olympics medals because he was so proud of his accomplishments. The horses give him a sense of ownership, his parents said.

His father said Holistic Riding Equestrian Therapy is focused and pushes the riders to be independent.

“It’s amazing, not just with David, but for those with all sorts of disabilities,” he said. “There’s a real bond. They get on the horse and it’s almost like seeing somebody different.”

*Michelle Mullins is a freelance reporter for the Daily Southtown.*

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