

Equestrian angels provide medicine for those in need

Ken Roche is a man with a true calling. A vision he had for helping people by providing contact with horses became a reality two years ago when he and his wife Jennifer founded the Equestrian Angel Therapeutic Outreach Program.

Since that time the couple has brought the joy of horses to hundreds of people through equine interaction with miniature horses. "So many people miss out on the benefit of horses, so my goal is to reach people who for any reason do not have access to horses," Ken said.

Ken grew up in Old Jefferson, but spent a lot of time on the north shore visiting a camp in Bush purchased over 40 years ago by his grandfather. Horses have always been a part of his life, starting with the ponies he had as

a little kid "right on this property" and later riding horses along Jefferson's river levees.

In 1993 Ken began a career in nursing, working at Ochsner Hospital for ten years. He continued to practice nursing in Colorado, where he lived for seven years and where he met Jennifer, a fellow nurse and a native of the Rocky Mountain state.

His experience with hospital patients was the inspiration for Equestrian Angels. "I noticed that distraction could change a patient's whole outlook on what was going on in the hospital, and so I used humor to make them laugh and forget," he said. One day the idea came to Ken that if therapeutic dogs could help patients, then horses would also be effective.

The couple moved back

to Louisiana, where Ken put his idea to work. First Ken bought a pair of Falabella miniature horses, one of the smallest of the equine breeds they are usually no taller than 8 hands (32 inches) in height at the withers.

The pair of red and white paint minis named Vince and Eli, lived in the backyard of the couple's home in old Jefferson. The horses were a curiosity in the "neigh"borhood, when Ken started trying to convince people of the value of equine interaction.

"Since nobody was used to the idea, I started cold calling nursing homes, asking if I could come by with the horses and visit with the patients," he said. The couple only had Vince and Eli for two weeks when they got their first booking at Chateau Notre Dame in New Orleans and weren't exactly sure how the visit would go.

"I know big horses spook, so I was sweating bullets the first visit, because I didn't know if they would be calm or not," Ken said.

Happily, what happened that first visit was a miracle of sorts, because the little horses "didn't flinch" despite the automatic doors, wheelchairs, walkers and other unknown and potentially frightening objects. The reaction by the residents was overwhelming, with patients hugging the horses and getting kisses from them.

So calm and cooperative were Vince and Eli that the staff asked if they would visit the facility's hospice patients on the third floor. Although it was their first elevator ride, Ken recalls, the little horses went right up as if they'd done it a million times before and brought smiles to patients for whom the touch of a horse brought back fond memories.

"We were blessed," Ken said of that first encounter. "Nobody had ever seen this before, but who doesn't grow up wanting a pony."

Ken kept making calls and the idea began catching on.

Since that first visit, Vince and Eli have visited nursing homes, hospitals, treatment facilities, schools and Angola prison. They even have their own ID badges for Ochsner Hospital, where a

protocol was written so they could visit.

"At first I thought I'd make smiles, but I realized that the therapeutic value goes beyond that," Ken said. "I had no idea how powerful this could be - I've seen miracles."

Equine therapy has been used successfully to help treat a variety of physical and psychological problems. It's been used as therapy for the physically handicapped and has become an accepted tool when conventional treatment fails for a wide variety of behaviors, including mood disorders, eating disorders and gang violence.

The physiological benefits of hippotherapy are well documented and include lowered blood pressure and heart rate, accompanied by decreased stress levels, reduced feelings of anger and anxiety and increased feelings of well-being.

To help others Vince and Eli, who have been joined by two other minis, "rookies" G.G. and Champ, have attended benefit walks, pet days, fundraisers and fairs. "Anybody that's trying to raise money for a cause, we'll go," Ken said.

All of the Angel Therapeutic Outreach visits are made completely free of charge and the Roche family has made great sacrifices in their commitment to help others. Only recently has the couple received sponsorship from Concerned Care Hospice Foundation, to help offset the costs of the program.

To make room for their expanding family which now includes twin 9-month-old daughters, Ken and Jennifer recently moved to Bush where they built a home and a new barn for the horses. Their hope now is that others in the horse industry will recognize what an asset the program is and get involved.

"I think now I've proven the power it has and what we can accomplish with a couple of little horses," Ken said. "Now we want more people to get behind it and empower the equine outreach program."

To learn more about the Equestrian Angel Therapeutic Outreach Program visit www.equestrianangel.org.



Hugs and kisses are an essential part of the Equestrian Angels Therapeutic Outreach Program. Based in Bush, it uses miniature horses to bring joy to persons in nursing homes and hospitals and to children with special needs.

