

Small horses bring big joy on visits to ill and elderly

by Angela Hill / Eyewitness News

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NEW ORLEANS – Sometimes in the winter of your life, smiles are harder to come by. And sometimes when you're young and not feeling well, laughter is elusive.

But when Ken Roche and his miniature horse Eli have their way, a smile is just a few hoofs away.

Having been a nurse for 15 years, Roche knows about illness. At Ochsner he's worked in many departments. His wife Jennifer still works in the pediatric ICU. Together they are committed to making a brighter day - one patient at a time.

They've seen that just a touch can make a difference - just a visit from a tiny horse can bring a smile.

They say that Eli can bring a bit of fun and laughter into a patient's world and for a while, no one is sick and everyone is having fun.

Eli is just one-year of age, but somehow understands he has a job to do.

It's all about taking the person's mind off of their situation. For a moment there is no medicine or pain or worry, just smiles and affection and fun.

Eli is not the only equestrian angel. His buddy Vince is big with the senior set at Chateau de Notre Dame and other nursing homes in the area.

Ken and his wife started Equestrian Angels because of their love of people and horses. Ken grew up with horses and just knew the human/animal connection could be the

best of medicine. They do this on their own dime and their own time.

"People do think of these guys as angels," said Ken. "I've heard it thousands of times. I've seen miracles happen to them."

Like a lady Ken and his horses met at another nursing home.

He said the woman would just sit and stutter all day, but when he took Eli over to her and introduced them, the woman stopped her stuttering to remark, "I like him," before going back to her stuttering. The nursing home said it was the first words the woman had spoken in years.

And then there was the first hospice patient Vince ever visited.

"He walked up and grabbed the man's pajamas," Roche recalled. "He started pulling him up and down and the man started laughing. He started grabbing the sheet and tugging the sheet and the man thoroughly enjoyed it. He laughed so hard."

A short time later, the man died.

But, Vince had done his job - as he did on the day Eyewitness News came to follow him around - on that day Vince was visiting a lady friend on the hospice floor.

The light in the woman's eyes showed she remembered her four-legged friend.

It's all in a day for the Equestrian Angels -bringing a smile, allowing a touch, and helping to create real laughter.

Ken and his wife have spent their professional lives in medicine.

They have seen the sadness and fear. But, what they see in these two tiny horses is the ability to take away- for even a moment - what life has brought.

They see it in the eyes that light up in the laughter they hear and in the music still in the hearts of everyone.

The Roches hope to make the "Equestrian Angels" their full-time profession and are working on establishing their non-profit status.

If you want to know more about the program you can call 504-452-1018 or visit <http://www.equestrianangel.org/>.

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