

Taking People with Disabilities Where Wheelchairs, Crutches, or Braces Cannot

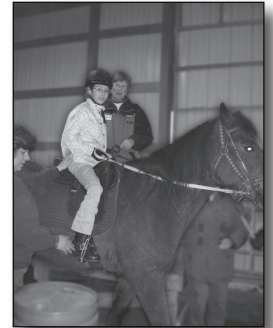
by Jenna Larson, Midwest Forage Association

If you ask Meg about the best part of her life, she would undoubtedly say “being able to ride a horse every week.”

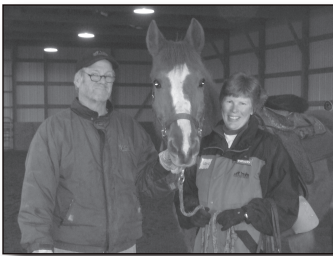
Meg is a part of the “We Can Ride” program. For 26 years, this program has provided therapeutic horseback riding and carriage driving to children and adults living with disabilities.

Horseback riding is recognized as a uniquely beneficial form of therapy for individuals living with disabilities. A horse’s gait, similar to the human walk, helps strengthen spine and pelvic muscles, improve posture and coordination, and increase joint mobility.

Bill Voedisch and Laurie Carlson, who opened a “We Can Ride” location on their East Wind Farm, are long-standing MFA members. Bill serves as the local council contact for the St. Croix Valley Forage & Grassland Council. At their East Wind Farm, in addition to producing hay for their horses, they also sell hay to the equine market in the Twin Cities.



Meg and Ranger



Bill, Laurie, and Chester

A few years ago, Laurie Carlson decided it was time to “give back” so she became involved with “We Can Ride.” A friend of Laurie’s asked her to serve on the “We Can Ride” Board of Directors in the early 90’s. She served for 8 years. “I felt hindered because I had not volunteered for the Program while I was serving on the Board, so I decided that my goal was to become a certified instructor for “We Can Ride.”” After a few years of training as a Teaching Assistant and a Certified Instructor, Laurie and her husband, Bill Voedisch, were able to expand the opportunities for children and adults within the Twin Cities by opening a new location for “We Can Ride” at their Marine on St. Croix farm.

The “We Can Ride” program is a premier accredited member of the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA) and annually serves 250 clients at four locations. “We Can Ride” offers a series of classes each week to strengthen client’s skills. They work towards achieving the goals determined by the client and their families. Clients are placed into classes depending upon their needs, age, and abilities. Laurie meets with each family to discuss the rider’s needs and goals.

Each rider is a part of a team which includes a horse, a leader, and two side walkers. Each participant serves a purpose in achieving goals set forth by the rider and their families. Committed volunteers work with the same riders each week. This partnership helps create a trusting relationship which can expedite and maximize results.

Individuals with physical, mental and emotional disabilities not only benefit from the exercise through “We Can Ride,” but they also develop discipline and concentration required to learn new riding skills. The special bond the rider develops with the horse helps boost confidence and self-worth. Meg’s father, Paul commented, “Meg connects with the horses and the people here at “We Can Ride”, the program offers a real commitment to the kids and adults that are participating.”

Bill and Laurie’s commitment to bring the program, “We Can Ride,” to the St. Croix area changes the lives of many children and adults. Just ask Meg’s dad, Paul. “When Meg was asked to list God’s gifts as her first reconciliation within the church, Meg’s responses were horses and Kathy Adams, her Teaching Assistant and side walker for the past four years.”

When asked how she benefits from the program, Laurie said, “I feel like there is something to be learned from each rider. I first joined the program due to my attraction to horses, but the relationships developed with the clients are the reasons that I continue.” To find out how to become involved with “We Can Ride”, visit www.wecanride.org.

Information obtained from We Can Ride’s volunteer pamphlets. A special thanks to Meg, Laurie Carlson, and Bill Voedisch for their contributions.



Bill Voedisch and Laurie Carlson’s “We Can Ride” site at their East Wind Farm (Marine on St. Croix, MN), one of four sites in the Twin Cities providing opportunities for “We Can Ride.”