



Heartland Equine Therapeutic Riding Academy

HETRA ■ PO Box 260 ■ Valley, NE 68064 ■ (402) 359-8830 ■ www.hetra.org

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Dear HETRA Supporter,

Imagine for a moment not being able to comb your own hair, or brush your teeth or as a parent anxiously waiting to hear your child call you “Mom” or say “I love you!”, and being told that it may never happen. These are very real everyday struggles that some of the students and parents at HETRA deal with on a daily basis. Here is the story of my family’s struggles dealing with a child with a disability and the miracles that the horses of HETRA provided in my child’s life.

Nathan’s life began very much like any other child. He was meeting all the milestones of sitting, crawling and walking. He was always a happy baby, only crying when he needed to be fed or changed. Then he began to say a few words, right on schedule. Then around 15 to 18 months his development slowly began to take a slide backwards. ***He lost all verbal communication that he had previously developed.*** His eye contact seemed to lessen and he became more withdrawn into his own world, and he stopped talking to us. ***The son I had so many dreams for was slowly slipping away from me.***

Next we embarked into the world of the unknown. The school psychologist verified he was developmentally delayed. Twice a week, we loaded him and his car seat on a school van, and he began an Early Intervention Program.

We went from doctor to doctor trying to find reasons for the Nathan’s ongoing struggles. A MRI test indicated a diagnosis of cerebral disgenesis. But we truly felt there had to be something else....some other explanation. We took Nathan to a variety of therapies trying to find a way to find our son again. At one point we were taking Nathan to speech therapy 3 times a week and occupational therapy once a week in addition to the other services he was receiving through his school. Through the school and the other therapies, Nathan began to use sign language and Boardmaker symbols to communicate with us. He also developed a verbal cue “Dah”. ***As all mothers dream, I still longed to hear my child call me “Mom” and to tell me “I love you”.***



In 1998, one of our therapists told us of a therapy that used horses. We did some research and found HETRA (Heartland Equine Therapeutic Riding Academy). A few weeks later, Nathan began his first therapeutic riding session. ***Tears came to my eyes as I saw my little boy gleam as he sat like a prince on his valiant horse.*** He smiled from cheek to cheek. As the horse walked around the arena, ***Nathan seemed to possess a new sense of self-esteem that I had not seen before.*** He loved the movement of the horse. Edye had a gentle and encouraging way with Nathan. “You are awesome” was a common expression of Edye’s to encourage Nathan.

As Nathan’s riding sessions progressed, the horses continued to motivate Nathan. At first he learned to use sign language to let the horse know when to go and stop. Then slowly he surprisingly began to use verbal cues for the horse. ***I couldn’t believe my ears when I heard my child trying to say “Walk On” and “Whoa”.*** ***I believe that this was the major breakthrough that we had been waiting for.*** We had finally found the motivation for him to talk! I will never forget the day he realized he could control the horse’s movement by using his words. What an amazing day!

The rewards we have received from HETRA did not end on that special day. The HETRA staff continues to motivate Nathan to improve his horseback riding skills. They have accommodated his riding activities to his preferences. ***He loves music, often singing “Happy Birthday” to everyone in the barn.*** Another favorite activity is playing a game of Wheel of Fortune focusing on Nathan’s strengths with letters and spelling. ***Today, Nathan is working very hard toward riding independently.***



“As all mothers dream, I still longed to hear my child call me “Mom” and to tell me “I love you”.”



The instructors and volunteers continue to amaze me with their talents, kindness, and patience in working with our special children. ***HETRA has become like another family to us. We always feel like a part of the group not just a visitor or customer.*** HETRA has given Nathan opportunities to grow both physically and mentally. The program has challenged him to become more independent and confident.

At HETRA the stories like Nathan’s are numerous. HETRA currently serves approximately 55 students per week, using their 15 therapy horses, and 100 volunteers at the 2 locations (Omaha and Valley). But it isn’t easy, and the costs are very high. HETRA has vowed to keep their services affordable for their clients, but as a result is required to supplement over \$75 each time a student rides. ***But you can make a difference!*** HETRA’s donors are a very important part of the family, enabling them to continue to create small miracles like Nathan’s everyday. By donating to HETRA, you can become part of the “extended family” and help to ensure that their work with Nathan and all of the students can continue for years to come.

Warm Wishes in this Holiday Season,

Kathy Sangimino
HETRA Board of Directors Member
& Nathan’s Mom