



Jack Henderson, Jonathan Maciel, Carmen Maciel and Ann Henderson take a lap around the Rainbow of Hope arena.

God created this

Story By: **CAROLINE SUTHERLAND**

Rainbow of Hope, a program for autistic young adults, started with a whisper

A less than cautious pair of German Shepherds named K-Bar and Rainbow nimbly navigate their way through the sturdy bars of a horse corral in an eager effort to meet strangers.

The several horses barely notice. A pony named Treasure gets her “nails” done by a local farrier. Their owners, Ann and Jack Henderson are the proud operators of Rainbow of Hope, a special needs school and ecotherapy program at Silver Star Horse Farm in Rosharon. It is soon to be an equine assisted therapy ranch designed for autistic young adults, but the students don’t get to ride the horses ... yet. They’re looking for a special person to add to their staff to turn that all around.

Back in 2020, when a couple of old friends got together on Facebook, Rainbow of Hope was born. Ann Henderson hadn’t seen her old friends Crystal and Vivian since they had been therapists together 15 years prior. Her old friends wanted to know what Ann was currently involved with. After relaying she was

still working with special needs youth, she asked them if they’d like to come out and help her. Their acceptance of the role was one of the first beams of light that shone through Ann’s prism of hope for helping kids on the Autism spectrum. It was a crucial partnership for the formulation of Rainbow of Hope.

Ann’s old friends – “the girls” – would drive out twice a week from an hour away. They would all three go on field trips to various destinations with the students, experiencing such places as the skating rink or exploring local fruit farms. They’d also have regular life skills classes for the kids. Ann says, “I think that God was using the girls to help me get a handle on building it, and I knew early on that Rainbow of Hope is designed for young adults with autism and other disabilities.”

The idea actually started long before that. Twenty-five years ago, when Ann had a dream, she is certain she was being led by the Holy Spirit. She said, “The words ‘Rainbow of Hope’ were whispered in my ear, and I was shown a



Photo by: Prentice C. James

Ann Henderson shares pictures of activities that have taken place at Rainbow of Hope Texas in Rosharon.



Photo contributed by ROH

Melanie Chau, left, and her mother, Mariam Chau, work on sign language in a classroom at Rainbow of Hope in Rosharon.

big star just like this one here.” She points to the large metal star of Silver Star Farms. “We have had 85 beautiful rainbows here over the years, and I know that God has created this.”

Ann wants to make it crystal clear this program is not for younger children. At least not yet. When the equine assisted therapy program is up and going, it will then open to younger kids. Their need is also great, and according to Ann, it’s all about service, but for right now it’s just for young adults with autism. She says this is because the older aged group doesn’t seem to have any programs available to them at all. They are doing something about that.

Rainbow of Hope is currently in need of a PATH instructor so that the students can learn to physically mount the animals and go for an assisted ride. However, out of the saddle, there is still much to be learned. There is plenty of work on the ground level, so to speak. There are 16 horses presently housed at the Rainbow of Hope ranch. Most of them are rescues and all of them are gentle. Tasks such as grooming, feeding and just simply being in the vicinity of these magnificent animals brings out a light and a newfound resilience in the children. It is a glow of pride that is so often seen to grow exceedingly brighter with a job well done.

The longer the child’s exposure to the many focused activities relating to the animals, the larger their smile. Sometimes, the louder their words. Non-verbal children can find their voice at Rainbow of Hope. In one extraordinary case, a breakthrough student spoke in a sentence for the first time, jumping up and down while pointing and exclaiming, “I see a horse!” The children gain self-esteem and self-worth from their duties on the ranch. They clock in and out just as they would at any other place of employment, teaching the kids indispensable and useful life skills. The kids have even earned \$10 an hour in the past; however, current financial restraints have hindered the ability for that to continue.

Annette Owen is the activities coordinator who comes up with a calendar every month and she is the one who decides what they’re going to do on various days. “Back to Basics Saturdays” proceeds from 9 to 11 a.m. and includes basic horse care, learning teamwork, developing confidence and human animal bond. Thursdays from 1 to 3 p.m. is “Rainbow Day,”

which is an opportunity for the kids to get out of their daily routine for some art to food preparation, interaction with ponies and physical fitness. Many of the young adults are out of high school though not yet in college nor working. Rather than just sit around the house, they can come out to the ranch where Rainbow of Hope incorporates work with play.

The students have worked with St. Thomas Food Pantry in the past, and they now partner with Harvest for the Hungry. This is in part because their missions to provide food to people with food insecurities is paralleled. They have an organic garden where they display bee boxes, fruit trees and even a coop of chickens offering fresh eggs. Their mission is all about empowering and touching the lives of our young adults with autism and other disabilities through the healing power of horses, life skills and social skills.

The students learn about teamwork through various activities, including working together to create a jump course out of PVC pipes for the well-known and loved miniature Shetland pony, Angelina, to navigate through, often with shocking precision. Working together with Harvest for the Hungry, the kids also congregate to produce the "Rainbow Seed Box." It is a nifty plastic case labeled and created by the students. It has 24 individual seeds inside and they sell these for \$25 plus \$5 shipping. They can last for years, and all people must do is store them in a cool environment and plant them when they want fresh fruits and vegetables. Among the seeds are watermelon and summer squash, and the children harvest the seeds from the fruit for the project themselves. The idea came to fruition when the grocery store shelves were barren and fresh produce was scarce during the pandemic. The proceeds all go back to Rainbow of Hope and can be ordered on its website.

Another one of the school's students had a mother who initiated an ongoing soap production program. She wanted to be able to give her daughter a feeling of independence since she couldn't go to school anymore due to her disability. The child's mother helped start it off, aided by the diligence of the staff, and "Soap for Hope" was created. The school started teaching all the young



Photo contributed by ROH

Sydney Hodge loves on Pal in the Rainbow of Hope Arena in Rosharon.



Photo contributed by ROH

Alexane Lesage works on her fine motor skills in the Rainbow of Hope classroom at the Rosharon nonprofit.



Photo contributed by ROH

Jonathan Maciel, Abel Luisa, Carmen Maciel, Melanie Chau, Mariam Chau and Ann Henderson pick corn from farmer Tommy Journey's cornfield.



Photo by: Prentice C. James

Ann Henderson discusses the inspiration behind the star décor at Rainbow of Hope Texas in Rosharon.

adults how to make soap.

"I'm hoping that it will be part of the education center," Ann said. "There's also going to be a commercial kitchen in there and we're going to teach construction."

All the proceeds will also stay in-house and go toward financing Rainbow of Hope's endeavors.

"Early on," Ann says, "God told me when I was building this program, 'You're not going to charge these parents,' and I didn't for the first two years, and I still haven't, but now that we are getting more established and we are an official 501©3, we will be charging for the equine assisted therapy program; we have to.

"I don't really know how everything else is going to fall into place yet."

The satisfaction of helping this ever-growing group of children is what keeps the Hendersons going. Ann regales a picture from back when she first started the program.

"This is Abel," she says, "that boy I was telling you about, he's nonverbal." It's common that physical communication from a severely autistic child be relished just as much as verbal. "We were walking out in the pasture to get hay bags and he grabbed my head, and he just put his hands on my head, and the feeling that I got was almost like the heavens opened up and gold glitter just glittered down on the two of us in that particular moment.



Photo by: Prentice C. James

Sarah Hope, a farrier at Rainbow of Hope Texas, prepares to trim hooves during a visit to the facility.

“God gave me a dream two days before this meeting and this is what he showed me,” Ann said as she displays a white erase board with three different subjects. One was the equine special needs of a PATH certified instructor; the other was the back to basics that they are already doing and last but certainly not least they want to serve our veterans. “I don’t know how God’s going to orchestrate that, but he will, especially once we get that PATH certified instructor.”

Plans of building a 4,000-foot education center have been discussed with the Hendersons by a generous contributor.

“It could be starting with that building and Harvest.” Ann said. “We need a van to transport our kids from Rainbow of Hope to Harvest for the Hungry. Their building is going to be ready in April – wow! – and we are busting out of the seams in here.” At Rainbow of Hope, they are going to be creating and building entrepreneurs by teaching them job skills and getting them ready for successful, independent adult lives.

As Ann says, “The sky’s the limit, you know!” ■



Photo contributed by ROH

Abel Luisa connects with Ann Henderson in the pasture at Rainbow Of Hope in Rosharon.



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