

# Horses Brighten the Day for Seniors with Dementia

## Blue Ridge Center for Therapeutic Horsemanship

Georgia Andrews



Two years ago, Donielle Palmer, Director of Resident Services at Shenandoah Valley Westminster Canterbury (Westminster), had an idea to utilize equine therapy to assist seniors living with dementia. She then contacted Marjorie Youngs, Executive Director of Blue Ridge Center for Therapeutic Horsemanship (Blue Ridge), and the two of them began to hatch a plan. Unfortunately, the newly developed program was then halted due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Finally, after a two year wait, the Memory Support Program has become a reality.

Every Thursday for 6 weeks, three of the seven residents selected for the program by Westminster staff, spend approximately 45 minutes interacting with the therapy horses at Blue Ridge in Boyce, VA. These residents living with dementia are accompanied by other residents from Westminster who have volunteered for the program and have backgrounds with horses. The

Blue Ridge volunteers serve as horse handlers, keeping everyone safe and interacting with the residents. There are no specific requirements for the residents to participate. They are all living in different stages of dementia and have different needs.

Before the program began the staff at Blue Ridge spent hours acclimating the horses to wheelchairs and rollators. It takes a special kind of horse to do this work, and Blue Ridge is lucky enough to have three: Honey, a Half linger pony mare, and two geldings, Dillon and Chief. They all stand quietly and patiently as they allow the residents to take their time to touch and brush them. The horses must remain calm, be aware and respond to the presence and touch of the residents for there to be meaningful interaction. This can be observed in the resident's improved affect, arousal level and willingness to interact with the people around them. The sessions end with the Blue Ridge volunteers leading the horses in a 'horse parade' around the arena so that the residents can see the horses move and ask more questions. The Blue Ridge volunteers are overwhelmed by the thumbs ups and joy displayed by the residents.

Jillian Kay Huhn is the Activities Dementia Coordinator at Westminster. She has served in that role for a little over two years and has high hopes for the continuation of the program.

"In times of pandemic and quarantine and isolation, the pandemic has not been easy for anyone, especially those living with dementia," she pointed out. She further finds "It is just so great to take them here to see something new and bring them back old memories for that once lived on a farm or had horses at some point in their lives."

The residents and volunteers all ride to the center in the Westminster van. On the way back home after the sessions the residents will call their loved ones and talk with them about the experience. Jillian was overwhelmed herself at the response from the residents and said "there were two residents that were so happy they had tears in their eyes. Even those who don't have much experience with horses, you could just see their faces light up when they brought the horses out of their stalls.

Both Westminster and Blue Ridge look forward to continuing the program into the future and seeing what benefits it may bring the residents.

Blue Ridge Center for Therapeutic Horsemanship provides life-enhancing, equine assisted activities for persons with disabling conditions in the Northern Shenandoah Valley in Virginia and contingent West Virginia counties.

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