

Sundays on the Farm, SpiritHorse: Our Feature Farm



If ever I were to travel to the North Pole, I would hope it would be a bit like the experience I had in visiting Spirit Horse, and Santa Claus would be a bearded version of Charles Fletcher, the man behind the farm. As much as snowflakes, icicles and the tapping of elfin hammers might pervade the chill air at the top of the world, oak shaded brick pathways, gleaming leather tack and the clip clop of a horses hooves mixed with words of encouragement and approval, set the scene at this equine assisted therapeutic facility in Corinth, Texas. A surreal sense of calmness and joy suffuses the farm, the ponies and horses, the dogs and the people carry on with their business in an organized yet comfortable manner. This is a place where over 45 children have spoken the first words in their lives, and over thirty children have sat up for the first time. The overwhelming demeanor that each individual carries says confidently “Here is a place I belong.”

Mr. Fletcher took some time with us in the early fall to share the passion that has occupied his days since retiring in 2002. Guided by his love for horses and compassion for individuals and the wisdom gained from 50 years as a competitive horseman in both driving and riding disciplines, Mr. Fletcher set out to build his therapeutic program on the 17 acres on which he had raised his family, starting with only three riders. The man has a remarkable ability to organize a program so that he can optimize the



equine therapeutic experience for the greatest benefit of the equines, the volunteers, the riders and their caregivers. Now, 450 riders annually are able to ride at the center in a weekly “lesson” completely free of charge. The 25 acres adjacent to Fletcher’s 17 are presently leased to the center and Spirit Horse hopes to be able to acquire the land through purchase sometime in the future.

Quality of material and effort are two things that stand out clearly in helping the center function optimally. The program draws largely on the wisdom and experience of retired show ponies for its equine pool. The equipment is top of the line and is acquired both through donation and purchase because Mr. Fletcher feels strongly that both the ponies and riders deserve the best equipment, and the best equipment will last the longest. Volunteers are given extensive training. Each day’s work, the pony and equipment to be used, and the riders whom they will be helping are clearly spelled out in the posted schedule. A board of advisors provides medical and veterinary expertise.

The riders, individuals who face a variety of different challenges, come to the farm largely through referral by medical and social work professionals. Victims of abuse, “at risk youth” and children with physical and mental disabilities and challenges receive an hour of individual attention tailored to them



specifically. The first interactions may be ground interactions only as an individual becomes comfortable with the horse. First rides may be taken either in a driven carriage or astride a pony led on the trails.

Mr. Fletcher has the mind of a scientist and has lined up a myriad of problems he would like to solve and questions he would like to answer. His capability for organization has focused him first on autism; through observation, interpretation and introspection he has developed a multi-step program that he

uses for individuals diagnosed with autism.

The SpiritHorse program is highly regarded by medical professionals who have served as advisors and who seeing the results of the program, firmly believe in the benefit of Fletcher's methods. Fletcher explains that riders with autism are his highest population in the program and so he started with this particular issue where there was greatest need; but some of his interest in autism is clearly driven by his past in electronics and the telecommunication industry. To sum up in a very small way, Fletcher sees



the work he does with individuals and horses as a means of stimulating communication pathways in the brain that may not be fully developed. Knowing that he had retired from Rockwell as a Vice-President, I assumed that some institution of higher learning must have been responsible for Mr. Fletcher's brilliance and success. "No, I never went to college," he explained, "when I was five my father's life was taken by a drunk driver, my mother was left to raise five children, so there wasn't encouragement to go to college." Fletcher's first job was at the age of seven working for an Uncle, 12 hours a day 6 days a week. He continued on his path of hard work, training saddle horses, riding to hounds and show jumping along the way, and worked his way up through a fascinating and expanding industry. Extracting this small glimpse of what has led him to be the force behind SpiritHorse was difficult, as he far prefers to talk about all those who he has gathered around him to create what is truly a

phenomenal place. I walked away from our morning with Mr. Fletcher, both humbled and euphoric, having seen with my own eyes a man who truly lives on top of the world and opens his doors to those who will benefit most from sharing it.

Please take the time to go to spirithorsetherapy.com to read more about the programs, to learn about opportunities to visit the farm and most of all, to see what you might have to give to this incredible program.