

Beyond generosity

Man's work is gift of love for families of disabled people, says **MIKKI KIRBY**

There is nothing sweeter than watching my niece succeed at something. Like any proud aunt, I relish in her accomplishments.

But being Tobi's aunt is truly special. Twenty-seven years ago, our family was blessed with a premature baby. She came four months early with developmental disabilities. I was four years old and eager to play with my new toy that came in a two-pound bundle. It took her three months to leave the hospital after a series of surgeries to save her life, including heart surgery.

Because she couldn't wait to come into the world, I have had the privilege of knowing many other people with special needs and the people who love them.

When I met Charles Fletcher last October, it was an instant bond. People who have been touched by a relationship with someone with disabilities recognize that within one another.

Mr. Fletcher started SpiritHorse Therapeutic Riding Center nearly four years ago. He says he was called to it after spending time with disabled children while volunteering at Equest Therapeutic Sportsmanship riding center in Wylie.

"Your life changes and everything comes into perspective after you know these children," Mr. Fletcher said recently at a horseback riding lesson with my niece. He turned his ranch in Corinth into a free riding center after he got that perspective.

With Tobi's needs come many days of frustration and fear and sadness. She suffers from obsessive compulsive disorder, which often drags her into depression and worry.

We as a family hang on to the days when she is feeling well and full of smiles and pride. On Tuesdays at Spir-



Courtesy of the Kirby family

Mikki Kirby congratulates her niece, Tobi, on graduating from high school. Ms. Kirby says she has always taken pride in everything her niece has accomplished since she was born prematurely and with developmental disabilities.

itHorse we get to enjoy that side of her.

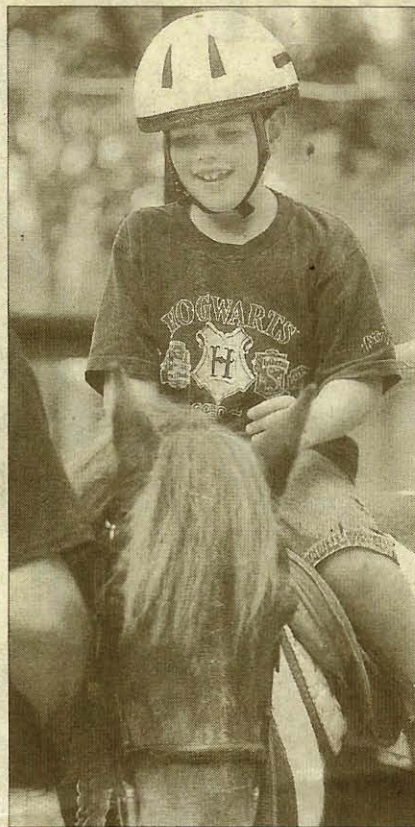
Imagine a day in the life of Charles Fletcher, who trains more than 300 disabled children to ride horses each week.

"When children are here, they are not their disability," he says. "They experience things they knew they could do but people told them they couldn't."

When she was born, doctors told us that Tobi would not run, read or write. She does all those things thanks to my courageous sister, who has consistently pushed the envelope. It was decided that Tobi would determine what Tobi could accomplish.

But without people like Mr. Fletcher, many disabled children would never know they could ride a horse or, for that matter, even speak.

A majority of his riders have autism, a neurological disorder that affects the normal functioning of the brain, impacting development in the areas of social interaction and communication skills.



FILE 2003/Staff photo

A visually impaired 8-year-old rides a pony with minimal assistance from Charles Fletcher at SpiritHorse Therapeutic Riding Center in Corinth.

Mr. Fletcher doesn't accept the word "can't." In turn, he has witnessed a couple dozen children speak their first words on a horse. Research shows that horseback riding is an incredible therapy for autism and other disabilities.

"In the beginning, I asked God to make me comfortable with the children. Instead He made me love them," Mr. Fletcher said.

Just think — he spends almost every day relishing in their accomplishments. I'm glad he's there to enjoy Tobi's when I am not. He deserves it.

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