

Kindred spirits.

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Apr. 29--The old pony was found starving in Northeast Texas and was placed in a rescue shelter. The little girl born with a physical defect faced a bleak future in a Russian orphanage. Two years later, here they were together, as unlikely as that might seem. Smiling in anticipation, the child who is almost 3 sat astride the docile sorrel whose home is now a small ranch south of Denton, the SpiritHorse Therapeutic Riding Center. The organization provides free riding lessons to people of all ages with disabilities. "Nadia, what do you tell Cinnamon?" Tammy Miller asked her adopted daughter. The chubby, blue-eyed child remembered the command she was taught by her instructor to make the pony go -- "Walk on!" she happily cried -- and away they went, walking beneath a canopy of trees toward a narrow trail, two improbable companions, both lives dramatically changed by the spirit of compassion and the gift of un conditional love. Tammy and Mark Miller didn't adopt because they felt a need or obligation to save some unwanted child. The Flower Mound couple simply wanted kids, a family. So three years ago they traveled to a Russian dom rebyonka, or baby house, and brought home an 11-month-old girl named Zhanna.

When the couple decided to adopt a second Russian child, their caseworker at Gladney Center for Adoption sent them a photo of an infant who had been placed in another baby house, in the Chuvashia republic. Some experts report that many orphaned Russian children don't receive enough stimulation and experience some degree of developmental delay. The child in the photograph had no arms. Her right leg was 2 inches shorter than her left. But the round face in the snapshot spoke to the Millers. It beckoned them. "The image of her stayed there," Tammy said. "It just wouldn't go away." After obtaining more information about the baby and her medical history, the couple made two exhausting trips to visit her, flying to Moscow and then riding eight hours by train to the orphanage where the child was housed with more than 100 others. The Millers weighed the challenges they would face if they adopted Nadia. People born without arms but with normal legs and feet often learn to use their feet for eating, writing, drawing, playing games and doing many kinds of work. But developing skills like walking takes time. Tammy drew inspiration from a book written by a woman born without arms who enjoyed a successful singing career. The couple returned from their second overseas trip and introduced Zhanna to her baby sister. Their daughters became best friends. They play with dolls together. Like her sister, Nadia loves to draw. She holds the crayon between her toes. After tucking Nadia into bed and kissing her goodnight, Tammy often hears the expressive child singing to herself in the dark. Her favorite melodies are the Sunday school songs she listens to on a singalong tape, which features Bob the Tomato and Larry the Cucumber and their VeggieTales friends. "She is a normal kid," Tammy said. "She does what everybody else does. She might do it differently, but she does it. I've never thought of Nadia as disabled. She finds her own way of doing things." Last fall, on the recommendation of a physical therapist, the Millers contacted SpiritHorse. The benefits of horseback riding are recognized by many medical organizations. Because the exercise gently and rhythmically moves the rider's body in a manner similar to the human walk and stimulates the vestibular system (inner ear), people with physical disabilities who receive the therapy often show improvement in flexibility, balance and muscle strength.

Many riders at SpiritHorse have cerebral palsy, Down syndrome or autism. Instructors have heard children on horseback speak their first words. They have seen others take their first steps or sit up for the first time because of the therapy. Nadia loved the outdoor exercise from Day One. "She was a natural at it," her mother said. "She just knew 'I'm going to like riding horses. This is the best thing.'"

Tammy Miller observed improvement in her daughter's balance almost immediately. Less than three months ago, at age 2.61/27, Nadia took three, four, five steps in a row at their home. Her progress and determination moved the mom to tears. At SpiritHorse, riders participate in leading, grooming and saddling their therapy animals. For months Nadia led her pony while being cradled in her mother's arms, holding the lead rope between her toes. At a recent lesson, instructor Tammy Moore told Nadia that the time had come for her to perform the task alone. She wanted Nadia to walk Cinnamon from the pasture gate all by herself. The little girl did, too. With the lead rope draped over one shoulder and tucked beneath her chin, Nadia took several steps, Cinnamon in tow.

"That's so empowering for that child," marveled SpiritHorse founder Charles Fletcher. Nadia helped saddle the animal. She also groomed Cinnamon, stroking the sorrel's neck with a brush attached to her foot.

Though riding therapy fosters self-confidence and independence, safety is foremost. When Nadia rides, the pony's reins are attached to the back of her vest with Velcro. Moore told Nadia to steer her four-legged friend herself by rotating her upper body right or left and to halt by leaning back in the saddle. "Nadia, you're the rider. I'm just the walk-along," Moore reminded. The watchful instructor led the animal as the parent rested a reassuring hand on her daughter's ankle. The adults took turns offering words of praise and encouragement.

"Big turn, Nadia. That's it!" "Look how you're sitting up, so nice and tall!" As the old pony and young rider traveled leisurely along the wooded trail, the wind in Nadia's face, this delightful toddler who hugs her mother with her heart suddenly thought of the music of her cartoon friends. In a tiny sparkling voice, with life-affirming joy, she began to sing. "I got peace like a riv-er. ... Peace like a riv-er ... in my soul." ----- David Casstevens, (817) 390-7436

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