



Katja and her son, Aiden



making a difference

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sunshine THERAPEUTIC RIDING CENTER

HEALING WITH THE POWER OF HORSES

A new therapeutic riding center designed to improve the lives of individuals with disabilities has recently made its home in Hot Springs. A love for horses and their son's Down syndrome diagnosis prompted Zach and Katja Summerlin to found Sunshine Therapeutic Riding Center (STRC) after realizing the need for this type of service in Garland County. Their vision is to make hippotherapy and therapeutic riding services accessible to all individuals with disabilities in the area for little to no cost.

Katja was born and raised in Switzerland, and she and Zach, who works for the national park, moved to Arkansas eight years ago when their firstborn child, Sophia, was only a year old. Both horse-lovers, the couple eventually purchased a 35-acre piece of property out on Sunshine Road with hopes of owning their own horses one day.

"At the time I didn't know I was pregnant, and at the time, I certainly didn't know that I was going to be a mom of a special needs child,"

Katja said. Aiden was born with complications, and the family spent four months at Arkansas Children's Hospital. "Once we came back to normality with him being home after a year or two—because it was pretty intense the first two years with his care and everything—we had no idea what we were going to do with all of our land. We knew we no longer had the time for horses because he needed a lot of therapy and still does."

But, after searching for a center that could provide Aiden with hippotherapy and therapeutic riding services and coming up empty-handed, the idea of forming their center began to unravel.

"We finally just thought, 'If not us, who?' We love horses, we have a child with special needs who we love above and beyond, and we have land," Katja said. The idea for STRC was there, but the next question presented itself: How were they going to fund it? Not knowing many people in the community, Zach and Katja began to network with friends and other contacts, and a year later, Katja had formed

a board of 12 members for the organization. Currently, plans for fundraising are underway, but nothing is set in stone yet.

They hope to have STRC operational in 2020 but are in desperate need of donors, whether it be donors of time, services, or money.

"It has become obvious that we have a need to fill in Hot Springs and that it needs to be a community effort, somehow. It really baffled me because at home where I'm from, and also around the U.S., the bigger cities have centers like this. Those services are available to a lot of people, but Arkansas seems to be kind of behind the times," Katja said. "And, what also surprised us, with Hot Springs being such an active horse community with the racetrack, why is nobody doing this?"

"But so far it has been an incredible journey, and we're very confident that we're going to become operational this year, we just need help."

Ten percent of the county's population, which is roughly 14,000 kids, are under the age of 18 and have one or more disabilities. And, research shows that hippotherapy and therapeutic riding services can often benefit those with disabilities differently, and even more effectively, than therapy done in a clinical setting.

"The horse in a therapy setting provides the rider with neuromotor inputs, meaning it stimulates the brain. All of a sudden, certain things are possible on horseback while the horse is moving, whereas,

in a regular therapy room without movement, this would not be possible," Katja said. She added that working with a horse also boosts confidence, helps with stability, makes learning more comfortable, and there have even been cases where non-verbal individuals have suddenly spoken for the first time while on horseback.

"Then, it's also the experience of working with an animal like that there are so many sensory inputs that are helpful for children with autism, touching the fur, touching the mane, or brushing a horse, taking care of a horse—there are so many angles of how you can use a horse in a therapy setting or just recreationally. The horses are just a wonderful tool to use in therapy," she said.

For more information or to donate, visit www.sunshineridingcenter.org.




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