



Partner in Joy

At Ride for Joy, we serve student riders experiencing a spectrum of chronic illness and special needs or who are veterans.

Ride for Joy's students, Milo and Charlie, are twin brothers who have been provided professional, compassionate equine-assisted activities in 2021. Julie, Milo and Charlie's mom, details how their involvement with horses at Ride for Joy has positively impacted their family.

My boys, Charlie and Milo, have been participating in the Ride for Joy program since the beginning of this year, and aside from it being hands down their favorite activity, we have also seen so many benefits for our boys.

Charlie and Milo are my youngest. They are twin 6-year-old boys and they both have a diagnosis of Down syndrome.

Knowing what I know now and the fact that twins with Down syndrome are extremely rare, let alone fraternal twins with Down syndrome — unbelievably rare — I felt I had an opportunity I couldn't pass up. All I could see were medical issues, delays, and challenges. In my ignorance, I didn't see there was so much more — a genuinely beautiful person beyond the diagnosis — and I think many others struggle with that as well.



When we received our diagnosis and wrestled with the implications, I really longed to find a way to see what my future might be. I wanted to know what life would really look like with Down syndrome. And at the time, that was very hard to find. So, I decided I would do my best to offer that to others and to create a platform where others could get a glimpse into real life with Down syndrome in the hopes that it would encourage other families receiving a diagnosis. Later, it grew into a way to advocate for acceptance and inclusion and even things like ending the "R word."

Charlie is the oldest by 29 minutes. He was born first, which fits with his personality. If there's anything at all to volunteer for, Charlie is the first to raise his hand and shout, "ME!", and it's always "MY TURN!" He was also a full pound bigger than Milo, a trend that has continued all six years of their lives.

Milo was not on board with being born the way I or the doctor had planned and instead was delivered via emergency C-section. Again, this just fits. Milo marches to the beat of his own drum, and it doesn't bother him one bit when others have a different rhythm. He keeps us guessing, but he is beautiful mystery.

Although Charlie and Milo are twins who share the same diagnosis, their similarities beyond that are few. Where Charlie is adventurous and aggressive, Milo is cautious and snuggly. Charlie is all about sports and anything loud — roaring dinosaurs, big trucks. Milo is happiest with a favorite book, songs, and hugs from his favorite people; thankfully, I am privileged to be one of those people.

Ride for Joy is genuinely the highlight of the boys' week. On days when they are tired and don't want to get up, hearing they get to ride "horsies" that day makes them bolt out of bed! When it's hard to leave what they are doing, knowing they are coming to see Tucker, Addie, Madonna, Sub, and Sunny makes the transition easy as can be.

Milo has always been cautious of things that "go." Those battery-operated cars that kids can ride around in were too much for him a year ago. There was no way you'd get him on an amusement park ride — even the most benign kiddie ride.

Then, one day last summer, we drove past a sign for pony rides at a farm. On a whim, I pulled in to give it a go. I let the employee there know that Milo likely wouldn't go for it, and they said they wouldn't charge me if Milo wouldn't ride. To my surprise, not only did Milo ride, but it was about all I could do to get him OFF the pony when the ride was over!



Then he wrapped his arms around the pony's neck for a big hug when he was done. Zero fear!

That's when I decided it was time to get on the list for Ride for Joy!

Since beginning the program here, I have seen Milo's confidence just blossom. We have since gotten him

one of those battery-operated cars, and he loves it! Earlier this year, we even took a trip to Lagoon Amusement Park, and even though he still won't ride all the rides, he enjoyed lots of boats, cars, airplanes and even a little roller coaster.

Charlie, too, has benefited in different ways from Ride for Joy. He has a personality that loves to be in charge, so being able to direct a horse is right up his alley! The volunteers and program coordinators encourage him to use his words during therapy, and speech is one area where Charlie can use the most practice. Also, because he loves to be the boss, following directions isn't always his strength. Here, he gets to practice following directions, then see the direct benefit by having the horse respond to his voice.

The boys are also building core strength and stamina, which is a challenge for both of them and really most kids with Down syndrome. Every session, there are numerous skills to practice and opportunities to learn and grow. Their love for the horses motivates both boys so greatly and brings results that are harder to achieve in a more clinical or academic setting.

We are so grateful for Ride for Joy and for the volunteers, and we are just so blessed to be able to participate and experience riding in this



phenomenal facility!

Julie McConnel

Ride for Joy delivered equine-assisted activities and therapeutic riding experiences to 198 students in the past 12 months. Will you partner with us in compassionate, therapeutic riding this holiday season? With your help, lives like Milo and Charlie's can be greatly enhanced.

Your gift can be mailed in the enclosed, addressed envelope, or you can go to RideForJoy.org/donate-2 to make a contribution online.

Your financial gift in any amount will provide therapeutic horseback riding and equine-assisted activities to students with special needs and chronic illness and those who are veterans. We are funded by the generosity of donors who care about the transforming power of horses to heal, refresh, and empower students.

May your 2022 be filled with joy! Happy holidays and merry Christmas from our herd to yours!

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