I grew up with horses and knew how to ride one before I could even walk. We keep six horses at my house and I am an avid rider: competing in many competitions around Minnesota. Not only do I love riding horses, but I also enjoy teaching kids how to ride them. I have been giving horseback riding lessons for over two years now. When the opportunity came up to observe and become part of a therapeutic horseback riding facility, I jumped right on it. It will be interesting to see the differences between each riding facility. Anna and I will be observing and writing together. Haley, a friend of Anna’s, works at True Strides and she made it very easy to examine and become part of this subculture.

I think therapeutic horseback riding not only gives kids with disabilities a chance to learn, but also gives them a chance to improve physically and mentally. I am assuming that most of these kids will have Autism or Down Syndrome and will have troubles with proper movement like raising their arms up in the air, uncontrollable movement, and yelling. I believe these kids are in it so that they can start getting control of themselves and to really start finding the potential they have. Since most kids are horse crazy, I supposed they probably also do it for enjoyment.

I know it takes patience to teach kids how to ride, and I am assuming it will take even more to teach those with disabilities. The workers would have to enjoy what they do, because if
they didn’t, there would be no point in working there. Just seeing the enjoyment the kids get out of it should be enough motivation for the workers to come back every day.

I. Preface (Anna)

As a leader in my school and church, helping others is something I enjoy. Growing up, serving and volunteering have always been a part of my life. When the opportunity came up to observe the True Strides therapeutic riding program at Camp Courage, I took it right away. I’ve heard of similar programs and how beneficial they are for special needs kids. Although I have been exposed to a few people with disabilities throughout my life, I have never had any real experiences working with them.

True Strides was recommended to me by my friend Haley, who is on staff and gives lessons three times a week. Although I have some experience with horses and took riding lessons myself when I was in elementary school, I have no experience with horse therapy. The combination of riding and therapy is extremely intriguing to me. As previously mentioned, I enjoy helping people, and this is a way that is unfamiliar to me.

Going into my first observation, I have a basic understanding of what the program will look like. I know that most, it not all, of the kids at these lessons will have special needs. What type of special needs, I don’t know. My assumption is that there will be many kids with Autism or Down Syndrome. I know that the during the lesson, volunteers walk along the sides of the horse while another volunteer leads the horse. I am not sure how many people are actually paid to give the lessons and how many are volunteers, but I assume that it is mostly volunteers. Knowing the vast variety of disabilities that exist, I assume that some of the children will be lower functioning than others. I would also guess that most of them will be middle school age or younger.
Based on what I know, there are two types of people involved in this subculture: the children on horses, and the therapeutic riding instructors. For the people who are giving the lessons, I assume they are involved because they have a passion for either horses, helping people with disabilities, or both. For the people receiving the lessons, I know that they come because they have some type of disability, and are wanting to improve their physical condition. I am curious to see if there are more reasons beneath the surface.

II. Background Information

*Therapeutic horseback riding* is the use of riding a horse as a treatment for medical conditions and to train people in proper riding technique. According to Neurology Care PC, horseback riding has a long history of being used for therapeutic reasons. It was used to help wounded soldiers in Greece during the fifth Century B.C. and in the mid 20th Century Liz Hartel, a Danish women, used horseback riding to overcome her polio. She went on to win the silver medal in dressage in the 1952 Olympic games. In 1969, therapeutic horseback riding was finally introduced in the United States. The community has continually grown in popularity since then, and there are now over 600 accredited riding centers in the United States.

During therapeutic horseback riding, a person is positioned on a horse, typically with bareback pads and handholds on the saddle pad for stability. There is a therapist that watches the rider closely, whose purpose is to make sure the child is positioned correctly in order to best strengthen their muscles. The rider’s body movements are forced to respond to the horse’s movements (Bowling).

The True Strides website states that *hippotherapy*, which is “occupational or physical therapy that utilizes a horse in the treatment” provides cognitive, physical, emotional and social benefits for the rider (True Friends). Hippotherapy is proven to provide physical benefits,
especially for patients with neurological or ambulatory disabilities. Similar to therapeutic riding, a rider sits on the horse and the movement mimics a human walking. According to Dr. Allen C. Bowling, this “stimulates core muscles, stability, balance, and coordination” (Bowling). The difference between therapeutic horseback riding and hippotherapy is that therapeutic riding is recreational riding adapted to someone with disabilities. Hippotherapy is not just a horseback riding lesson. It is prescribed by a physician and must be given by a licensed therapist.

True Strides is a therapeutic riding program at Camp Courage, a camp for people with disabilities in Maple Lake, Minnesota. The Minnesota Horse Council lists it one of the 40 centers in Minnesota known for therapeutic horse riding (Dolson and Clapp). True Strides provides “opportunities for individuals of all abilities to experience exceptional equine-assisted activities” (True Friends). They seek to create a positive environment where each individual can reach their highest potential (True Friends). True Strides uses both therapeutic riding lessons and hippotherapy, depending on the child and their needs and conditions.

The director of True Strides, Shari, previously ran her own therapeutic riding program, Sharadise, in Monticello. When she took the position at Camp Courage, her entire program had to change. “For a while we weren’t really sure who was going to be able to stay on and move with Shari.” Haley told us. When the move was finalized this past September, Shari was able to bring most of her staff and several of her horses with her to Camp Courage.

III. Observations

First Observation: 28 February 2015  8:00-10:00am
Second Observation: 3 March 2015  4:00-4:45pm

Pulling into the small gravel parking lot of the True Strides Facility, it was unclear where to park. The only hint of what was a parking space was tire track in the snow from previously
parked cars. We had been told to get there at 8:00, and it was slightly surprising to see that at just after eight, there were no other vehicles in the parking lot besides a snow covered truck with a horse trailer attached. While waiting for the workers to arrive, we noticed a sign on the newly built tin barn that said, “Dudley Equine Center, True Strides Program.”

A car pulled up and parked next to us, but no one had gotten out yet. Within a few minutes, three more cars pulled up and three girls walked up to the doors, including Haley and someone who had keys to the barn. We followed them inside and found ourselves in a sitting room filled with artifacts of the program; pictures of kids and horses, tiny riding boots, and brochures about True Strides. It had a big indoor arena, a warming room with leather couches to lounge on, and a room off to the side with stalls to put the horses in. It looked and smelled like a typical horse barn. There was one major difference: Everything was handicap accessible.

Despite the below zero temperature outside, it was warm in the room. The inside of the barn was very brightly lit with pine wood lining the walls and a spotless concrete floor. The walls were covered in posters and paintings labeled “Friends” or “Teamwork”, showing the value the members of the subculture hold for these ideas. A small black cat named Elsa begging for our attention added to the welcoming atmosphere of the room.

We stood awkwardly in the entryway for a few moments before we saw one of the workers come out of the office and look at us questioningly. When we explained we were with Haley, she looked immediately at ease and told us where Haley was. This showed us that there is a high emphasis on creating a safe atmosphere for the kids. We were unfamiliar, and needed to prove to the staff that we could be trusted.

The staff was made up of mostly high school and college aged, brunette girls, and each person seemed to know exactly what job they had to do. They worked as a team to determine
which horses needed to be brought inside for the first lesson of the day. The attention they paid to detail showed how important it is to the staff that each lesson goes smoothly. Once they had the right horses, they brushed each one, put on tack (the equipment that goes on the horse’s head and back), and discussed what type of saddles would be most beneficial for the child that would ride it. Each member clearly knew their role in the process. The tack they used was unusual for a typical horse rider. The saddle pads and bridles were artifacts that set this barn apart from others, like the one Shyanne works at.

One girl named Jenna clearly ran the show. She gave directions, answered questions and carried herself with a confidence and maturity that made her seem much older than 19 years old. Jenna grew up on a small dairy farm in Rice, Minnesota, and has had horses since the age of nine. Being one of the few PATH (Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship) certified instructors at True Strides, Jenna was put in charge when Shari--the director of the True Strides program and a licensed occupational therapist--was on vacation. Jenna explained that Shari has played a huge role in getting her life to where it is now. “My mom works at a school and OT’s would come there to work with kids. One of them knew that Shari was looking for more help with her program. Shari helped me get certified and now I have clients here. It’s kind of become my life.”

Jenna then introduced us to the whole crew. They all said hello with a smile, then returned to their task at hand. The way they told each other stories and joked back and forth showed that they were fairly comfortable with us being there. When a volunteer named Tyler walked into the room a few minutes later and introduced himself, the staff’s reaction was the same. This made it clear to us that volunteers and new faces are a regular thing at True Strides, and the staff, although cautious, is comfortable adjusting to a new personality.
When the horses were ready to go, the first kids started to show up with their parents for the lesson. Surprisingly, not all of the riders had Down Syndrome or Autism. Many of the riders have problems with functions like speech, sight, and muscle strength. It was interesting to see how many of the kids seemed “normal”, considering we had assumed there would be many low functioning kids.

Each rider was required to put on a helmet, then walked up a wheelchair accessible ramp, and mounted their horses with the help of their parents and staff members. How much help the child needed depended on the severity and type of disability. Some kids were able to mount completely alone, while others needed to be lifted on. Once the rider was on, they gave the command “Walk on”, and a staff member or volunteer started leading the horse away from the ramp with a person on either side of the horse. As they started doing laps walking and trotting around the arena, each child’s face lit up with huge smiles, showing how special this time was to them.

After a few laps, the staff transitioned the lesson towards game time. The arena was filled with basketball hoops, beach balls and hula hoops. One of the favorite games among the riders is called “tap-tap”. Starting with the horse standing still, a staff member tosses a beach ball gently at the rider, and the rider has to hit the ball with both hands and send it back to the person who threw it. The rider is forced to turn their upper body, which works their core muscles. After a few tosses, the horse starts walking, adding a new level of difficulty to the game. We noticed that whether the ball was hit correctly or incorrectly, encouragement was poured out to them. If they weren’t successful in hitting the ball, the encouragement was mixed with “almost” and “try again”.
The staff was constantly positive. The way they talked to each other and the riders further added to the welcoming atmosphere set up by the “friendship” and “teamwork” signs. Donna, the barn manager, explained to us that in order to make these lessons successful, it’s necessary to keep spirits high. “If you come in here in a bad mood, then just turn around and go back home. The day is not going to go well. It’s not fair to the kids or to anybody else.”

When the hour was almost completely over, the horse was brought back to the ramp, and the rider dismounted their horse. They were able to give the horse a snack, or help groom the horse. The grooming process improves many smaller skills for the rider, such as decision making, following a pattern, and fine motor skills (True Friends). For some kids, feeding the horse was all about raising their confidence. Many of the riders are shy, and feeding the horse causes them to step out of their comfort zone, and forces them to trust the horse.

During the lessons, some parents sat in the bleachers overlooking the arena, while others sat in an office with big windows overlooking the arena. During one lesson, there were two friendly looking mothers sitting in the office chatting. Both mothers raved about the program and its director, Shari. “If we were not doing these lessons, we would not be where we are today,” said Holli, one of the mothers. Her daughter, GiGi, has multiple disabilities, including social anxiety and a chromosome disorder. “It's a huge financial commitment, so we wouldn't be here if it was not helping. This is definitely not recreational riding.” Despite the cost, both mothers assured us that it was worth it. “GiGi has been taking lessons for three years now, and the results have been amazing.”

When the lessons were done and the parents were finally summoned by their kids, the riders were physically exhausted, but their faces were still plastered with smiles. A staff member, usually Jenna, talked to the parents and updated them on how their child was
progressing towards meeting their goals. The entire program is based off of a system of goal setting that is used to keep the parents in the loop. “The parents are usually really supportive,” said Jenna, “We set goals depending on where the child is, and what they want to get out of it. We usually set therapeutic riding and hippotherapy goals. We write the goals with the parents and try to write a progress note every month.” This system shows the importance of keeping the parents involved in the rider’s progress, and further adds to the idea of working as a team to help the rider improve.

Each lesson is one hour long. With only this short amount of time each week, the instructors have to plan carefully in order to maximize the benefits for each rider. The rider must work extremely hard in order to get the most out of the lesson. “One thing that makes this program unique is that it’s intense. The kids get a lot out of it, and they get tired. But when they come back, they’re still motivated,” said Jenna. With most of the kids being elementary school age, the key is to make the time not only beneficial, but fun. Donna told us, “It’s like an hour of play and they don’t know they’re working,” Jenna added on, “We’re kind of sneaky.”

As a result of the hard work, the riders see results and improvements constantly. They build social skills and confidence that they are able to carry throughout the rest of their week. “When GiGi first started these lessons with Shari, I had to be on a horse next to her. If any other kid was in the room with her, she’d scream because of her social anxiety. Now look at her,” Holli told us as we looked into the arena and watched GiGi giggle with the instructors and another little girl named Katelyn.

The growth in these kids is not only emotional, but physical. “We had a girl who came in on Monday who had 30% bone growth, and her vision had improved,” explained Jenna, “Her hand eye coordination had improved. They wrote on the report that it was because of riding.”
Jenna and Donna are continually amazed at the results they see. Donna added, “We’re not doctors, but we see results that you would think you could only ever see from a doctor.”

Teaching therapeutic riding lessons is the only job many of the workers here at True Strides have. The program is very well organized and run, despite their major move this past September. It has been a stressful few months settling in, but Jenna says the situation is definitely getting better all the time. “Everyone has things that are tough, but we work through it pretty good, as a team.” Despite the amount of work it is, every one of the staff members made it clear how much they love it, and how rewarding it is to be a part of the program. “It’s kind of the best job ever,” Donna said, nodding to herself. True Strides is not just a job; it is a passion.

**Third Observation: 10 March 2015 3:30-6:30pm**

The next time we arrived at True Strides, the parking lot was muddy from the sudden arrival of spring that week. We walked in the front door with confidence of where to go, but unsure of what lay ahead of us. We had arranged with Donna and Jenna for us to volunteer that day, instead of just observing the lessons. When we walked in the door, we were greeted by a new face. “Can I help you girls?” asked a small, white haired woman in a very friendly voice. There was a brief pause of confusion before Anna asked, “Are you Shari?” She responded yes and we explained who we were since she had been on vacation the previous times we had visited. The fact that she checked out who we were when we arrived further proves the point that the staff is trying to keep the atmosphere as safe as possible for every kid who comes through the doors. We explained that we were there to volunteer, and Shari very quickly assigned us both to sidewalking jobs. This once again showed us how used to volunteers they are.
Since it was a beautiful spring day, we were able to bring each set of kids outside and go for a “trail ride” along the concrete Camp Courage driveway. The two riders for the first lesson were GiGi and Katelyn, the daughters of the two mothers we had met the previous week. Shyanne walked alongside GiGi’s horse, and Anna walked alongside Katelyn’s horse. We were quickly filled in on the rules of being a sidewalker; a hand is kept on the rider’s thigh, the rider needs to be watched to keep them safe, and breaks can be take when arms gets tired. A difference in this lesson from the last was that each horse had a “backrider”, an instructor on the horse with the child. This was for added safety on the trail ride. As we walked along the driveway, the staff encouraged the girls: “You’re a superstar!” We sang several songs, asked the girls how school was that day, and worked on a few skills, like putting hands out to the sides or in the air. The conversation and skills practice were rituals that were repeated in every lesson throughout the day.

One of the best parts of the trail ride was seeing the way the riders reacted to the horse and opened up. A blonde named Cate was back riding with Katelyn, and was asking her questions throughout the ride. For quite a while, Katelyn didn’t say anything, and quietly sat on the horse. But about two thirds of the way through the trail ride, she started to answer questions. When asked what her favorite song was, she started singing it very loudly. “Where did that come from?” Asked one of the staff members. Cate looked down at Anna and explained that when Katelyn had started coming to her lessons a few weeks before, she had been extremely timid and shy. “This is what makes it so fun,” Jenna said, overhearing what Cate was saying.

Seeing results like this is an extremely rewarding part about working with these kids. “They take things from that one hour session that they get to practice all week long,” explained Donna. “They think, ‘If I was able to do this during horse therapy, I bet I can do this other
thing,’ it challenges them and they end up exceeding everyone’s expectations because we do something with horses. It definitely opens doors for them and challenges them to push their boundaries, even if someone told them ‘You might not do this or that.’”

The more we worked with the kids and staff, the more it was clear to us that the staff did this for much more than a paycheck. They benefited just as much as the rider, just in a different way. “When I was newly certified I had a girl coming and taking lessons who had cerebral palsy. She had been told she would never walk on her own. Then one day she came walking into the clinic on her own walker,” Jenna told us. “It’s those types of moments that are motivation. Those things keep you going. It motivates you to think, ‘If these kids can do this, what can I do with my life?’ It pushes you to do things you wouldn’t normally do.”

This day the staff and volunteers were all female. Throughout the trail ride and the entire day, it became easy to see that they all got along extremely well. “It’s not very often you find a group of girls that get along so well,” Jenna told us. Whenever they weren’t talking to the rider, they were talking with each other. Much of the time was spent either discussing riders or planning Shari’s birthday party for the following Thursday. The conversations flowed between prom dresses, famous ancestors, and of course, horses. This made it clear that the relationships between the staff is one of the things that makes them enjoy what they’re doing so much.

After the trail rides, everyone went inside and the lessons resumed as usual. The topic of Shyanne having horses of her own had come up multiple times, and at one point Jenna asked her to go and untack one of the horses that was not being used in the lesson anymore. Although Shyanne was slightly surprised, Jenna had full trust in her. “Yeah, just go and put him in a stall, and hang his saddle pad and bridle on the stall door.” Through this moment and several others,
we recognized our acceptance into the group. At one point, Shari looked at Anna and said, “You guys should come back and volunteer more often.”

IV. Conclusion

Walking into the True Strides facility, we thought we knew what to expect. There would be horses, disabled children, and workers who were passionate about what they do. After our time spent volunteering with the program, however, we had learned so much more. The way the riders, staff, parents, and horses worked as a team showed us that each hour spent is more than a riding lesson; it’s a life lesson. While we expected the riders to benefit from the program, we know now how much the staff benefits as well.

“On Tuesday I had a lesson with a boy I have been working with for a very long time, and we have really developed a relationship,” said Jenna. “I was talking to his mom about his goals and saying how we really didn’t think he was ready for the next step, but we would push him and see where it goes. By the end of that lesson he was catching on to riding skills that I hadn’t even put on his goals sheet. [Giving these lessons] gives you the satisfaction that you were able to aid someone in doing something that someone told them they wouldn’t ever be able to do.”

Looking back on our first observation, we both will admit that we were slightly scared and uncomfortable with the idea of working with disabled people. As we became involved in the program, it became clear that there was nothing to be afraid of; all these kids needed from us was our friendliness and caring attitudes.

Similar to our personal initial thoughts, society often holds a pitiful or sympathetic view of disabled people. At True Strides, the staff is empowering these kids, so that they will be able to continue on to bigger and better opportunities. We know that because of this program, they
will do more than anyone ever expected from them. The futures of these kids are bright, and they will create a better image for disabled people in our culture.

True Strides is steadily growing, drawing in disabled riders and their families from more and more towns. The program is soon expanding further, adding a Veteran’s riding program, which will draw in even more of the community. We think that the True Strides program will continue to expand, due to the passionate leadership, positivity, and teamwork with which it is run. We have decided to continue volunteering, and look forward to seeing the program grow.

More than anything, this experience has taught us how much of an impact positivity, hard work, and motivation can have on a situation. The riders carry what they learn at Dudley Equine Center into every day of their lives, and so will we.
Works Cited:

