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Gentle beasts for patients' burden

With free riding lessons, Horse Power for Life brings smiles to people coping with cancer.

By Lauren Meade

For The Inquirer

Six-year-old Brynn Henry has spent half her life battling leukemia. But on a chilly April Saturday in Glenmoore, Brynn wasn't thinking about her cancer.

> All she could think about was trying to get the Chincoteague pony she was riding to catch up with her little sister, who was running circles around a barn. Brynn spread her arms out like an airplane as the pony advanced toward the giggling target.

> With so much of her life out of her control, Brynn, of Coatesville, has found a much-needed escape through horseback riding. She and her 4-year-old sister, Paige, are two of 13 students at Horse Power for Life, a nonprofit organization offering free riding lessons to cancer patients of all ages and their families.

> In 16 lessons, students learn to halter and tack up a horse, groom, lead, and ride at a walk and trot. The program also emphasizes understanding horses and how to communicate with them.

> Barbara Rosoff, the senior instructor and a cofounder, teaches students about the relationship between rider and horse, emphasizing the need for mutual respect. When Brynn pulled back on the reins, for instance, Rosoff instructed her to say, "Whoa, please."

> The program is open to anyone who has had cancer in the last five years, and each student can invite one relative. The organization doesn't determine whether patients are well enough to participate; children's physicians sign consent forms and list any restrictions.

> When Rosoff and a former student, Shiree Sansone, started the organization in August 2007, both had recently lost a relative to cancer. Sansone, whose aunt died of brain cancer, said she had experienced how cancer affected families emotionally, financially and physically.

> Funded entirely through donations, the organization spends about \$4,000 per student, Sansone said. The costs include boarding the horses at Banbury Cross Ltd. in Glenmoore, veterinary expenses, and liability insurance. In

April, Horse Power for Life raised \$28,000 at its first fund-raiser, at People's Light and Theatre Company in Malvern.

> Therapeutic horseback riding typically is offered to children and adults with disabilities. Chester County is home to the Thorncroft Therapeutic Horseback Riding Center in Malvern and Hope Springs Equestrian Therapy in Chester Springs. But only a smattering of organizations across the county offer therapeutic horseback riding to cancer patients.

> Other therapeutic riding centers for cancer patients include Camp Casey in Michigan and Horses for Hope and Healing in Ohio.

> Therapeutic riding programs typically aim to address self-esteem. Relatively few medical studies on this therapy exist, and the ones that do usually follow a small number of patients with disabilities or behavioral problems.

> Allan J. Hamilton, a neurosurgeon at the Arizona Cancer Center, studied therapeutic riding in cancer patients and found anecdotal evidence that it improved self-confidence. Other benefits include improved physical strength, fine motor skills, and concentration.

> Sandy Piliero, a 58-year-old breast-cancer survivor, said riding helped her cope with her anxiety. "I worry, 'Is it still lurking?'"

> "Horse Power for Life gave me an outlet," said Piliero, of Malvern. "All this time I'm involved in the program, I don't think about cancer."

> After Brynn's standard-risk acute lymphoblastic leukemia was diagnosed in August 2005, she went through more than two years of chemotherapy.

> "Because her life has been so out of control, she seeks control," said her mother, Halley Henry.

> Brynn developed fears of dogs and loud noises. Sometimes even the changing seasons could trigger her anxiety. Paige also was affected. When Brynn's hair fell out during the chemotherapy, Paige asked her mother if her hair would fall out, too.

> On the recent Saturday, Brynn and Paige played tag outside the barn and helped Rosoff lead the pony, Detour, to the field to graze.

> Henry said horseback riding had helped empower both her girls. Brynn was nervous around the horses in the beginning, but she rode Detour after the first lesson and now pets them.

> "I know it's making her feel proud of herself," Henry said.

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To Find Out More

> For more information on Horse Power for Life, visit www.horsepowerforlife.org/ or call 484-341-8393.

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