

## Hope, Horses, and Happiness

By Griffiee Albaugh

“We exist to change your life. (<https://www.sheacenter.org/about/our-mission/>)” This positive message is scrawled across the hoodies, t-shirts, and baseball caps of volunteers, clients, and therapists at the J.F. Shea Center for Therapeutic Riding. The J.F. Shea Center has been, “improving the lives of people with disabilities through therapeutic horse-related activities” since 1978 according to the organization’s website. In 2016, a pint-sized client with curly blonde hair peeking out from beneath her riding helmet stole the hearts of the organization’s furry and human therapists.



Jaxlee was diagnosed with cerebral palsy at age two and started riding at the J.F. Shea Center shortly thereafter per a family friend’s recommendation, her mother shared in a video interview about Jaxlee’s experience riding at the center. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), cerebral palsy “is caused by abnormal brain development or damage to the developing brain that affects a person’s ability to control his or her muscles.” Jaxlee’s hunched posture and lack of trunk strength, inability to utilize her fingers and hands to grasp, and limited verbal engagement prior to her therapy at the J.F. Shea center aligned with the characteristics of cerebral palsy as defined by the CDC.

A year into her equine therapy, Jaxlee’s progress is astounding. As a volunteer myself, I’ve witnessed the changes with my own eyes. Jaxlee cried inconsolably through her first few rides at the center, but she and her parents persisted until the weekly rides became a positive and transformative experience characterized by smiles, laughter, and Taylor Swift sing-alongs. In the center’s Fall 2017 newsletter her mother Emily shared, “[Jaxlee] verbalizes more; eats more food orally; her gross motor skills have improved and she can stand for a few seconds with minimal support. Jaxlee can crawl, which she couldn’t do before because her arms were weak, and she can ride the horse on her hands and knees and even stand up.”

The physical changes have provided Jaxlee with greater mobility and independence and her parents with great hope for her future and continued progress. Emily beamed as she noted that Jaxlee’s time at the center, “has become that magical experience that I was hoping for and dreaming of when we first started.” Thanks to her dedicated team of therapists and volunteers, both four and two-legged, Jaxlee’s making strides towards a brighter future each time she settles into her saddle.