

MY PEACEFUL KINGDOM

For children struggling with homelessness, a life-threatening illness, or domestic abuse, moments of joy can be hard to come by. But since it opened in 2009, that's exactly what Riley's Place and its co-founder and executive director Wendy Mattes have provided for thousands of Bay Area kids in need.

Located on the grounds of the National Center for Equine Facilitated Therapy in Woodside, Riley's Place offers a safe, welcoming space where children can learn about, care for, and connect with animals. The facility is currently home to three miniature horses, two Nigerian Dwarf goats, three bunnies, two guinea pigs, two cats, and a rooster.

"We call it our peaceful kingdom," says Mattes, a Los Altos resident and accomplished horsewoman who ran an executive search firm in the Bay Area before a multiple sclerosis diagnosis in 1998 led her to pursue a career as a riding instructor and trainer.

The inspiration for Riley's Place was a "horse-crazy" little girl named Riley Church, who began riding lessons with Mattes in 2000, when she was 8 years old. In 2004, Riley was diagnosed with an inoperable malignant brain tumor, and by 2006, she was no longer able to ride or travel to see her beloved horse, Louie. Mattes and several friends took action, borrowing a mini horse that they took to Riley's San Carlos home for a visit. Upon entering the living room where Riley was seated, along with about a dozen other people, the horse "looked around and went straight to Riley in her wheelchair, as if it knew why it was there," Mattes exclaims. "The look of joy on Riley's face is forever imprinted on my mind."

Sadly, Riley passed away not long after that visit, but the facility that bears her name has gone on to bring comfort to more than 4,000 Bay Area children. Visitors to Riley's Place can help care for the animals, or simply enjoy a temporary escape from their stressful situations. For children who can't travel, the staff can arrange visits to hospitals, homeless shelters, or private homes—all free of charge.

Riley's Place is a sanctuary for its animals as well, most of which were adopted from the Peninsula Humane Society. The rooster, Bucky, was the victim of bullying by other roosters and found the facility himself. "Somehow, he knew Riley's Place was a safe place to be, and he made his way up to our barn, collapsing just inside our gate," Mattes recalls. Since then, Bucky has trans-



Wendy Mattes with two Riley's Place residents.

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formed into a healthy, gentle therapy animal, delighting visitors by eating bananas out of their hands.

Riley's Place has become so popular that Mattes and her colleagues are launching a capital campaign to fund the addition of more animals and an eventual move to a larger home. (A May 11 fundraiser at the Garden Court Hotel in Palo Alto will help push them toward that goal.) Mattes, who has been there since day one, describes her role as a calling, not a job, stating, "It feels like I'm finally doing what I'm supposed to be doing." ♦ —ROBIN HINDERY

For more information, go to www.rileys-place.org or call 650.703.5199.