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At Riley's Place in Woodside, homeless and chronically ill children connect with animals

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The small boy at Shelter Network's Haven Family House in Menlo Park was given his choice: He could pick a miniature horse, a goat, a dog or a rabbit.

He chose the rabbit -- for a reason. When his family became homeless, they had to surrender their bunny to the Humane Society, and he missed it.

"He was so comforted to hold a bunny again," said Wendy Mattes, founder and executive director of Riley's Place in Woodside, a nonprofit organization dedicated to making such moments possible for homeless or chronically ill children.

If children can't come to Riley's, the all-volunteer group will take animals to the children -- all with the goal of allowing the children to forget their problems for a time and experience the comfort that spending time with animals can bring. Off-site visits include trips to Ronald McDonald House.

"We can't cure their illnesses or change the situation for the homeless, but we can bring some joy into their lives," Mattes said.

Riley's was inspired by the short life of Riley Church, who loved animals of all kinds but felt a

special passion for horses, which she rode regularly. The San Carlos girl dreamed of riding in the Olympics one day but was diagnosed with an inoperable malignant brain tumor in 2004.

In April 2006, when she was too sick to go see her horse Louie at Webb Ranch, Mattes, who had been her riding instructor, and some friends borrowed a miniature horse to take to Riley. No one who

was there will forget the smile on Riley's face when the tiny horse marched into her living room.

"The little horse looked around the living room at the assembled family and friends and then walked straight to Riley in her wheelchair and put her head in Riley's lap," Mattes said. It was as though the horse "knew her purpose for being there," she said.

Riley died a month later, at age 14.

But that day when the miniature horse was taken to Riley and the way the young girl lived her life -- with gusto and a deep compassion until the end -- stayed with Mattes, who founded Riley's Place in the girl's honor in July 2009 with the help of a small group of others.

Mattes said she hopes someone will donate land for a permanent home for Riley's, but she is grateful to the National Center for Equine Facilitated Therapy for allowing them to move to the back of the center's property in Woodside.

Another sponsor, Peninsula Humane Society, has helped Riley's expand its family of animals to share with children and, occasionally, adults. It includes three miniature horses, Kachina, Ayana and her colt, Henry Kapon; two Nigerian dwarf goats, Leo and Laverne, who have their own climbing structure; two rabbits, Casper and Robin; two guinea pigs, Harry Wiggums and Mistletoe; and Oreo, a black and white

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neighborhood cat who was donated to Riley's by his owner after the cat decided he liked living there better than his other home.

"These adoptions with Riley's Place are especially touching," said Scott Delucchi, senior vice president of the Peninsula Humane Society. "Formerly homeless, unwanted or neglected animals now have the life of the proverbial Riley, and they bring smiles to the faces of kids who have many reasons not to smile."

Every animal at Riley's has a story; every child they visit has a story, Mattes said.

So do the volunteers, many of whom go to Riley's daily to help groom, feed and care for the animals and help clean the small three-stall barn, with peek-through slots so the horses and goats can see and check on each other.

Riley Church "would be here night and day," said her mother, Andrea, who is one of the volunteers at Riley's Place.

"She adored animals, and how important they were to her during her radiation and chemical therapy."

During a recent visit to Riley's by children from Haven Family House, part of the Shelter Network, the two Nigerian dwarf goats, Leo and Laverne, greeted them at the bottom of the hill by jumping on top of picnic tables. The children's eyes got bigger and bigger.

By the time they had walked around the bend and up to the barn, they were screaming with excitement.

When a volunteer brought out the guinea pig Harry Wiggums in a basket, five children quickly gathered around and slowly reached out their hands to touch the creature.

"I touched him," a little girl yelled, "touched him."

Their delight grew as they met two of the miniature horses and the bunnies. One by one, they put on a helmet and took rides in a cart pulled by the other miniature horse, Kachina.

"It's just a great experience for them," said Amy Wright, director of major gifts for Shelter Network. "On the way home all they can talk about is coming back."

Contact Linda Goldston at 408-920-5862.

Riley's Place programs are free. But as an all-volunteer nonprofit organization, it relies on donations to feed and care for the animals.

To donate, visit www.rileys-place.org and click on donate.

Or, a check can be mailed to Riley's Place, 880 Runnymede Road, Woodside, CA 94062.

Reach Riley's Place by phone at 650-703-5199.

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