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Nonprofit enabling animals to help kids

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Wendy Mattes gingerly rubbed miniature horse Kachina's head Wednesday morning.

The rainy weather had taken a break and the animals at Riley's Place — a nonprofit nestled at the back of a larger property in Woodside — were eager to interact with visitors. Mattes, co-founder and executive director of the organization which connects therapy animals with local youth, was happy to oblige.

"I always say, 'if you lose faith in humanity, spend an hour up here,'" she said.

It's not a big piece of property but Riley's Place features a three-stall barn, an indoor space for bunnies and guinea pigs, an outdoor area for goats and a cat named Oreo who adopted Mattes' home for the therapy animals as his own. The 11 animals who call Riley's Place home are the hard workers who make the nonprofit's mission of providing free on- and off-site programs for local children possible. The organization works with children who are facing a life-threatening illness, are homeless, have special needs or who need opportunities to experience and appreciate the healthful benefits of interacting with animals and nature.

It's a special mission inspired by a special little girl, Riley Church.

Mattes began providing horse lessons after being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1998. She decided she didn't want to spend healthy years sitting behind a desk. The first summer camp Mattes worked at included Church, a little 8-year-old girl at the time. The two bonded and worked together over the years.

Sadly, Church was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor on New Year's Day 2004. She endured an intensive year-long treatment and was able to continue at school, taking riding lessons and entering competitive events. In 2006, Church relapsed. One day in April 2006, she wasn't strong enough to make it to the barn. Mattes, Martha Rykala, Lori Stambler-Hill and Joan Ravier took a miniature horse to her. They visited in the living room.

Mattes vividly told the story of how the mini-horse went straight to Church and put its head in her lap for an hour. Church died the next month.

Noticing the healing powers of animals, Mattes had an idea to create a place to bring little critters to children.

Andrea Church, Riley's mother, recounted getting a call from Mattes a couple years later describing the idea and asking permission to name it after Riley. Church was thrilled at the idea.

Today, Andrea Church and her husband Marty Church sit on the nonprofit's board. Andrea Church described wonderful outings at the small ranch, watching children play with animals and seeing how hard Mattes works to keep it going.

"It's because of Riley, but it's about the kids," Church said.

Mattes is surprised at the growth of the little idea which launched only in 2009. Eleven animals means the nonprofit is at capacity in its current spot in Woodside. That being said, Mattes still sees animals that she thinks would be wonderful additions to her growing family of animals. But first, the organization will most likely need to find its own land to expand and house the furry friends.



Heather Murtagh/Daily Journal

Wendy Mattes, co-founder and executive director of Riley's Place, feeds animal crackers to Leo and Laverne Wednesday morning.

To learn more about Riley's Place, or to donate to the nonprofit, visit www.rileys-place.org. The annual benefit dinner and concert will be held Saturday, May 19. Tickets are also available online.

Heather Murtagh can be reached by email: heather@smdailyjournal.com or by phone: (650) 344-5200 ext. 105.