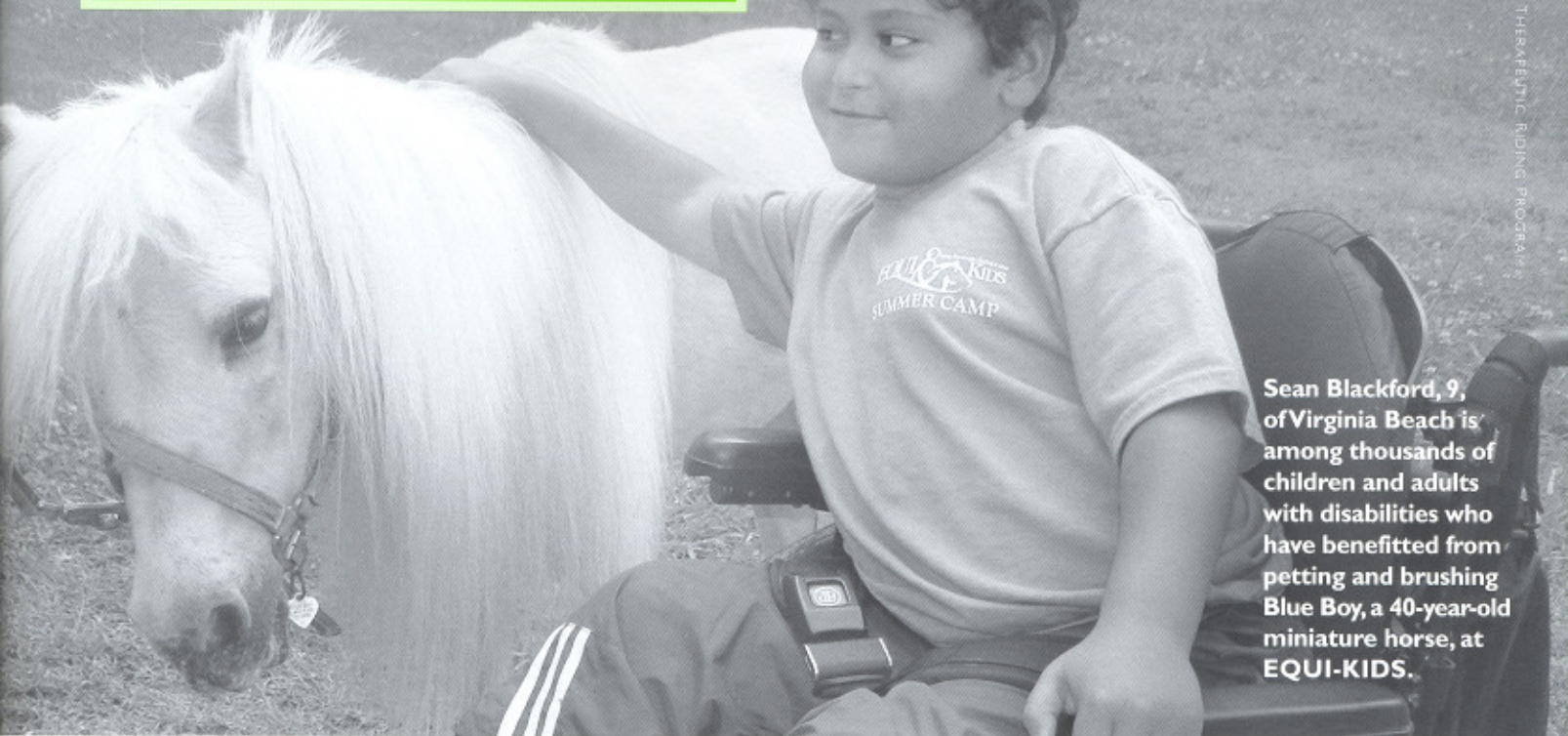


## EQUI-KIDS

### Breaking Barriers for Disabled Riders



**Sean Blackford, 9, of Virginia Beach is among thousands of children and adults with disabilities who have benefitted from petting and brushing Blue Boy, a 40-year-old miniature horse, at EQUI-KIDS.**

Conner Snead of Chesapeake spent four years on a waiting list, eager to get into the EQUI-KIDS Therapeutic Riding Program in Virginia Beach. The nonprofit, which began with one pony, six kids and executive director Barbara Ford 20 years ago, was just too successful.

Over the years, EQUI-KIDS moved seven times, each time to a little larger location, but it still lagged behind the demand. The waiting list grew to today's 350 students.

This summer EQUI-KIDS is scheduled to haul its horses, ponies, goats and bunnies once more, to a 92-acre compound the organization will finally own.

The land, off Sandbridge Road in the new Heritage Park community, was donated by the neighborhood's developers. It's a bit of a change to move from a farm in the woods to the middle of suburbia. But Ford believes the exposure will be good. One look at the faces of her riders, she believes, will convince visitors of the value of therapeutic riding.

The organization has raised nearly the entire \$5.3 million needed to build the facility and expects to move in debt free. A \$75,000 grant from The Norfolk Foundation's unrestricted funds was critical, Ford says, in helping keep the capital flowing as the economy soured.

"We're going to be able to bloom here," Ford says. An indoor riding arena will allow the program to operate throughout the winter. A 24-stall barn will provide room for additional horses. Having more horses should shorten or eliminate the waiting list.

There will be other benefits as well. No longer will EQUI-KIDS be just beyond the runways at Oceana Naval Air Station, constantly assaulted

by roaring jets – a problem for many riders. The new site will be quieter. A ring with gentle hills Ford calls her "mountain range" will let students experience riding on an incline. There will be a wooded trail, for cool summer saunters, and a sensory path for them to enjoy.

"We'll have bird houses and an herb garden where they can break off sprigs of rosemary and thyme," Ford says. "It will stimulate the senses for kids who just refuse to interact with the environment."

The center, accredited by NARHA (formerly the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association), serves those with mental, physical, emotional, social and learning disabling conditions such as Down syndrome, cerebral palsy and autism. Riders range in age from 3 to 60. It is an intensive program, with as many as three volunteers needed for every rider.

There's something about interacting with a horse that reaches many such students, Ford said. "We can get breakthroughs in hours or days," she says, "where other therapies might take a year."

Some students start their relationship with horses by brushing and petting Blue Boy, a 40-year-old miniature horse. Once clients are comfortable around horses they are matched with particular animals. Conner Snead dotes on Akwa, the 31-year old Arabian gelding he rides with help from staff and volunteers. Conner, 15, has a genetic condition that causes developmental delays and physical challenges. He functions at about a 5- or 6-year-old level, but those limitations seem to disappear at EQUI-KIDS.

"Once he gets a horse, he is just fully paying attention," Amber Styron, Connor's mom, says. "It's just amazing."