

# A STEP TOWARD HOPE



**I**magine yourself in a doctor's office. You were just told your child will never truly function the way others do. Your heart sinks, thoughts scramble and a feeling of helplessness overcomes your body. The only question you keep asking yourself is, "will my child ever be able to live life to the fullest?"

This was the situation Julie Frank found herself in when her seven-month-old daughter, Zoe, was diagnosed with developmental delays and later, Cerebral Palsy. At first, Frank thought this could be somewhat normal

for her child's young age. However, as Zoe grew, things were not getting better.

"We knew something was not right," Frank said.

*"While other kids do cheerleading, ballet, and other types of sports and dance Zoe rides cause that's her thing and she loves it."*

At the age of seven months, Zoe was admitted into ECI, an Early Childhood program, where she was set up to work with a speech therapist, physical therapist and occupational therapist to help her progress.

"She was not rolling over, she was not walking, she was not talking- nothing," Frank said.

Time progressed, and at the age of two and a half, Frank said Zoe had started walking.

When a parent Frank worked with suggested Hippotherapy,

Frank did not think it would be very beneficial to Zoe.

Hippotherapy is a type of physical, occupational and speech therapy where a therapist uses the characteristic movements of a horse to help improve the sensory and motor skills in young children. They had already tried large amounts of physical therapy, and Frank said none of it seemed to help.

“At the time, it was a lot of stretching, walking, and we’ve done cereal casting on her legs,” Frank said.

At first, Frank said she was skeptical about the idea because her daughter was already walking, but when the parent explained how it is more than just helping a child walk, Frank got on board and consulted Zoe’s speech therapist who agreed it would help Zoe. Not long after, Frank enrolled Zoe in Hippotherapy at the Texas Tech University’s Therapeutic Riding Center.

Tangi Irwin, program director of the center, was Zoe’s instructor. After two weeks in the program, Frank said Zoe started to talk for the first time.

“She started talking and wanting to communicate, and just from the riding we saw this difference in her, like a blooming or something,” Frank said.

When Zoe turned the age of three, she transitioned from hippotherapy to therapeutic riding, after talking with one of the co-directors, Leslie Thompson, Ph.D., who explained there is definite variation between the two. She said hippotherapy requires a licensed therapist, walkers, and sidewalkers to help the child. Therapeutic riding, however, allows the individual to be more independent and ride for pleasure or exercise purposes.

At the current age of nine, Frank says she has seen Zoe benefit from both types of programs. She said that when there are breaks in the semester, whether it be for spring break or Christmas, she sees a difference in Zoe’s gait, a decrease in her hip flexibility.

Frank said therapeutic riding has become Zoe’s thing. Along with riding once a week, she has been involved in the Special Olympic equestrian events and the Chisholm Challenge, as well as other competitive events that allow kids with disabilities to show off their skills and win prizes.

“She was in her first Chisholm, and we’re in this strange place, strange town, people she’s not familiar

with, and I’m in the stands and she’s on her horse and she comes out sitting so tall and she’s like, ‘hi mom’, so self-assured,” Frank said with a smile.

She says the family enjoys traveling to different places and supporting Zoe’s efforts.

“While other kids do cheerleading, ballet, and other types of sports and dance, Zoe rides cause that’s her thing, and she loves it,” Frank said.

In addition to riding, Frank said Zoe also participates in Challenger Baseball, which is a little league team for children with disabilities in the spring.

As a nurse, Frank said she has looked into how therapeutic riding has helped and will continue to help Zoe and children like Zoe.

Frank said she has focused on how therapeutic riding will affect her daughter physically and cognitively but she has also seen how it affects other kids in different ways.

She said she sees a boost in every kid’s confidence as they ride.

She said she hopes to see Zoe and the other children at the center challenged more in the future so that they can learn more as they grow older.

“My goal with her is to have her challenged, pushed a little bit, in a setting that she loves, and that she is comfortable with,” Frank said.

She also said she wants Zoe to be able to identify the parts of the horse and the gear used.

Frank said she believes that riding has really changed her daughter in so many positive ways.

“Getting her into riding when we did made all the difference,” Frank said. ¶



Julie Frank and her daughter Zoe



*MacKenzie Fletcher*  
SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS

