



Riding IT OUT

When students start college, they don't always know what they want to do or where they want to end up. They have some sort of idea, but for one person in particular, it wasn't until graduate school where she really found out what she would be doing the rest of her life.

Dr. Heidi Brady grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, riding different types of horses. When deciding where to go to college she chose the University of Virginia where she was introduced to polo. She got a dual degree with biology and art history while there. Upon graduation she went on to get her Master's degree in animal industry at Pennsylvania State University then went to New Zealand for five years and trained racehorses. When deciding it was time for a change, she came back to the states and got her Ph.D. in Animal Science specializing in physiology

of reproduction at Texas A&M University.

While a graduate student at Texas A&M, Brady's assistantship was helping with the therapeutic riding program. After completion of her Ph.D., she then moved to Illinois to teach at the University of Illinois and conduct research in equine reproduction. After two years, a position opened at Texas Tech University, so Brady applied and got the job.

"I was really excited when I came here and started working with the ranches and Texas Tech," Brady said. "It was a good fit for me."

When Brady arrived at Texas Tech, she noticed there was not a therapeutic riding program. She had enjoyed helping with the program at Texas A&M and she wanted to pursue getting one started and having actual courses that go along with it at Texas Tech.

In 1995 Dr. Tara Perry, an Assistant Professor in recreational therapy at Texas Tech University, and Brady came together and proposed a course to combine horses and therapy. It was not long before this idea became a reality.

That first year it was a joint course Brady said. They collaborated with the University Medical Center and borrowed \$500 in order to bring some therapeutic riders' horses in. The first three horses were donated to the program in 1999 but were kept in New Deal, Texas, due to the lack of facilities because their funds were limited.

According to Brady, a significant change for the growth and development of the program was when Heather Hernandez, now co-director of the program, came on board in 2006.

Hernandez first became interested in therapeutic riding because of her uncle, who has intellectual disabilities. While growing up, she went to his Special Olympic competitions and other events. This was enough for Hernandez to decide to get her bachelor's degree in social work from Baylor University and a master's degree in counseling from Texas Tech. After graduation, she decided to apply for a job at Texas Tech and came to Lubbock for an interview.

"I came up here and there was just so much opportunity with the University and so much diversity and ways to do research," Hernandez said, "I just couldn't turn it down."

Hernandez started out as the center coordinator and has since worked her way up. She now teaches Therapeutic Riding as well as Equine Assisted Mental Health.

With Hernandez's help, the program has done a lot of research, which started in 2009, through various departments throughout Texas Tech.

The program has collaborated with the Burkhardt Center for Autism in Texas Tech Universities education program to continue research. In the future, they would like to further study physical aspects

with therapists at the Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center.

Though research a big part of the program so are the students that volunteer.

"They get to know a rider all the way through the semester and it really changes their lives," Brady said, passionately. "You think you're having a hard day and you go out there with a rider who really works so hard just for everyday living and you see how the horse helps them and you see what you're doing as part of that class helps them."

One student in particular came to Texas Tech just for the Therapeutic Riding program. Madison Gay, a senior at Texas Tech, was looking for a place to certify in therapeutic riding and decided to look into Texas Tech's program. After visiting the campus and talking with Brady, she decided to give it a try and hasn't looked back since.

"It's like a small community out here," Gay said. "Everyone's friends and everyone's helpful as far as we all love each other."

Great volunteers and students such as Gay have helped the program grow over the years to 125 riders. The youngest rider to start was two and the oldest rider to start was 98.

"We've seen people take their first steps because of the riding, and their first words because of the riding," Brady said.

According to Brady, the program takes the riders to different events such as the Special Olympics and a Chisholm Challenge where they can be really proud of something.

As far as the future of the Texas Tech's Therapeutic Riding program, according to Hernandez, they would like to continue to grow and serve more clients in the South Plains area.

"It's always part of our mission to be able to provide services to clients regardless of financial capabilities," said Hernandez, "so were always fundraising and trying to find resources so that we can provide services to people who can't afford it." **T**

