

Spirit of adventure



Brad Zweerink/Daily Republic

Michael Muir pets Apollo, a Friesian stallion being kept at Rush Ranch. Muir, the great-grandson of John Muir, has multiple sclerosis and started Access Adventure, which helps disabled people enjoy the outdoors.

Michael Muir treks through life on path set by famous great-grandfather

By SUSAN WINLOW
DAILY REPUBLIC

FAIRFIELD — When Michael Muir was 8, he used a golden trowel to lay the cornerstone of the new John Muir Medical Center in Walnut Creek.

When the Dixon native, who is the great-grandson of famous naturalist John Muir, was 15, he lay in a hospital bed paralyzed from the neck down -- facing a diagnosis of multiple sclerosis.

He pretty much stared it down with aplomb. His parents, however, were concerned.

"We didn't know what to think," said Ross Hanna, Muir's father and the grandson of John Muir.

Hanna said a call came from the school that something was wrong. A year later, after the quick onset of MS and a lot of missed studies at Dixon High School and intense drug therapy, the avid horseman went to Europe with a friend and had few tell-tale signs of his MS.

He's cruised through life with a "can do" attitude that has parlayed itself into a successful volunteer organization -- Access Adventure -- dedicated to helping the disabled enjoy the outdoors. The organization com-

bines Muir's love of horses and nature.

Access Adventure, which began in 2004, is a program of Solano Land Trust based at Rush Ranch on Grizzly Island Road, outside Suisun City.

Muir, who now lives in a little cabin in Fairfield, has traveled the world, driven a horse-drawn carriage 3,000 miles from one side of the U.S. to the other (garnering the attention of many dignitaries), won carriage-driving medals throughout the world and created his own breed of horses, Stonewall Sporthorses.

"I got through that initial bout, and MS was not a part of my life," Muir said of his youth. "When you're a teen you've got that immortal thing, but I never doubted I'd get better."

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"I was in the horse business (already) at this time," he said. "I had pregnant mares, foals coming. It was important for me to get back on my feet."

Today Muir, 57, who also has prostate cancer and an unrelated hip disorder that necessitated five surgeries, is still surrounded by horses even though the signs of MS are prevalent. He largely uses a wheelchair to get around but uses trekking poles to walk short distances.

When he was about 40, MS curtailed his riding so he switched to carriage driving and became president of the U.S. Driving for the Disabled organization. In the last couple of months, however, he has been back on a horse with the aid of braces.

While it's been a blessing for Muir, it's also been a treat for his friends to watch as well.

"That's quite an accomplishment, and it's been (quite a while) since he's been on the back of a horse," said Mary Lou Fazel, who is also an Access Adventure volunteer. "It must feel good to feel the sides of a horse again."

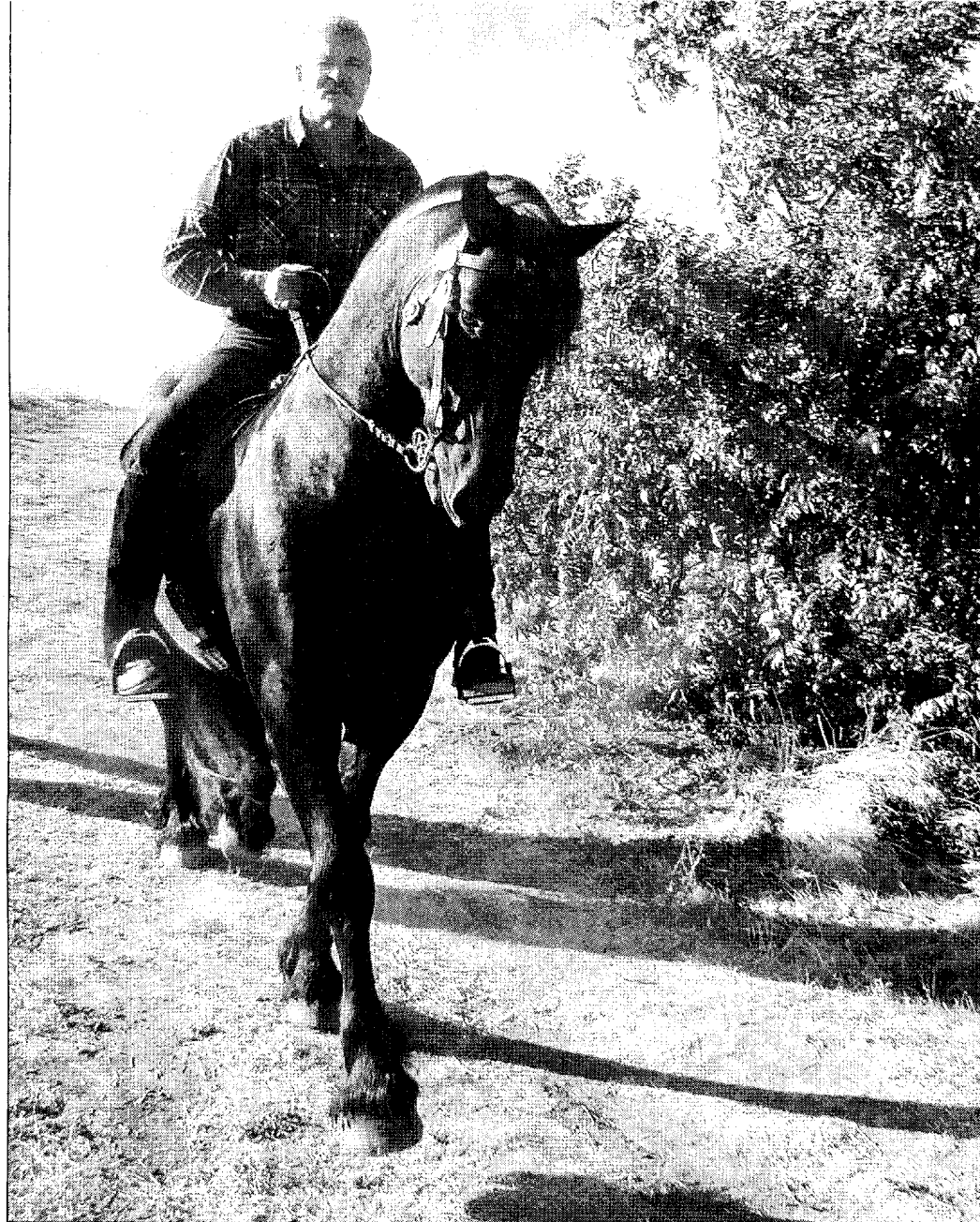
Muir rides every day for about 30 minutes, building his strength gradually. He's got his eyes set on the Para Dressage event at the 2010 World Equestrian Games, which will take place Sept. 25 through Oct. 10 in Kentucky.

When not riding or working with his horses, Muir's gone virtually every day promoting or working with Access Adventure in one capacity or another. He recently spent three days on the coast while People magazine shot a spread of him and Access Adventure.

Muir admits to bouts of depression, common in those with MS, but he doesn't let MS hold him back. His antidote for battling depression was to get "outside of himself."

"For me the horses were healing," he said.

Hanna said he believes his son's passion for horses is what keeps him going.



Courtesy photo

Michael Muir rides Apollo on a trail at Rush Ranch. Muir rides for 30 minutes every day.

Growing up in the tradition of a Muir, both Hanna and his son were encouraged to spread their wings, explore and try different avenues.

"There was hardly anything my folks wouldn't allow us to try . . . (that's) pretty much how we raised Michael," Hanna said.

Muir was raised to be a free spirit, of sorts, and lived a wild life, Hanna said, admitting that his life was much the same while growing up. Both father and son were encouraged to do the things they wanted. Hanna was quick to acknowledge there were also chores at home that still had to be done.

Beyond being raised to

respect and enjoy nature, Muir said his upbringing was influenced by that of John Muir. Muir said his great-grandfather was raised in an overly strict family and was "underfed and overworked."

"He raised his children in a totally different fashion, including my grandmother," Muir said.

That came with lots of freedom, meaning the children were not "locked in a classroom."

Hanna chuckled. He agreed his son is "stubborn," but also calls him a visionary.

"He's pretty much his own man," Hanna said. "He has his own ideas of what he wants to do . . . he has ideas

that some of us hadn't even thought of. Some of them work out pretty well.

"When he took off cross-country I told him he was crazy," Hanna said, talking about Muir's trek across the U.S. in a horse-drawn carriage. "He took off, and he made a go. We had to eat our words a little bit."

Muir added: "I have MS. MS doesn't have me."

"We didn't know where (the MS) would take him, but he's made the best of it and done what he can," Hanna said. "He's done a lot on this Access Adventure, and we're pretty proud of him."

Reach Susan Winlow at 427-6955 or swinlow@dailyrepublic.net.