positive people

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

BY JIM HINCH, SENIOR EDITOR

Nature's Cure

For the disabled he is a bridge to a world they might not otherwise know

SUMMER IN THE CALIFORNIA delta, and a salty wind was flattening the marsh grass. A tall, rangy man in Wrangler jeans and a red button-down shirt walked gingerly across a farmyard and hoisted himself into a carriage. Behind him a barn creaked, and behind the barn a line of shaggy eucalyptus trees groaned and rustled. The man, whose name is Michael Muir—yes, that Muir: he is famed naturalist John Muir's great-grandson—spoke soothingly to his horses while a motorized ramp lowered from the back of the carriage. A high school student maneuvered her electric wheelchair onto the ramp and was lifted up. A few more disabled students boarded, and Muir, with a flick of the reins, nudged the horses forward. The carriage lurched and the students squealed with delight. Soon they were wending their way over a rutted path, past low hills and across the brown, stubby plains of Rush Ranch, a 2,070-acre nature preserve here where California's two great river drainages—the San Joaquin and Sacramento—join and flow out toward the San Francisco Bay. For most of the students, members of a special-education class in the nearby city of Fairfield, the trip was their first into the outdoors. For Muir, it was the culmination of a lifetime's worth of healing.

Michael Muir looks like his famous ancestor. He has the same robust frame and the same gentle, searching eyes. But, unlike John Muir, who walked the world's mountains and labored hard to preserve them, Michael Muir doesn't light out on hiking trails. He has multiple sclerosis, and so he dedicates his life to something slightly different: helping people with disabil-

PHOTO COURTESY OF ACCESS ADVENTURE

GIDDYAP *Michael Muir and a friend at the reins*

ities experience an outdoor world many thought they were cut off from forever. Since 2005 he has headed Access Adventure, a loose coalition of ranchers, horse lovers and disabled people and their friends and families, who stage regular outdoor excursions in horse-drawn, wheelchair-accessible carriages. The excursions run the gamut from gentle rides through Rush Ranch to an ambitious 80-mile trek Muir led last year along California's remote Lost Coast. "People always focus on what the limits are," he said from his perch atop a carriage at Rush Ranch. "But nature is a healing force for all of us."

Muir has needed that healing since the day when, at age 15, he collapsed at school and learned from a doctor he had multiple sclerosis, a degenerative nerve disease that erodes muscle control and can leave some people severely weakened. The diagnosis was terrifying. But Muir willed himself into rehabilitation by focusing on one thing —horses. He'd grown up crazy about horses in a small farming town not far from where his great-grandfather's home and fruit orchard still stand in Martinez, California. As a teen he was already tending two mares and their fillies in a barn on a neighbor's seed lot. Lying in a hospital bed, he dreamed of those horses. "My motivation was to get back with them," he said. He did, and, against the odds, made

RANCH HAND *An Access Adventure participant bonds with the horses.*

a career breeding, riding and training horses on farms in California and Kentucky.

By the late 1990s, though, Muir, like many who live with MS's oscillating symptoms, found himself at a low physical ebb. Reading a horse magazine, he came across an article that sounded too good to be true. "It was a nationwide search for people with disabilities to try out for a team to go to the world carriage-driving championship for the disabled," he said. Muir tried out and made the team, which used carriages adapted from a British design for disabled horse lovers. The carriages were primitive, Muir said. But while working with the team, he met a Quaker couple from Indiana named Jerry and Barbara Garner, horse breeders who liked to tinker. The Garners made several improvements to the carriage design, including battery-powered electric lifts. Suddenly, Muir said, he realized the carriages could be used for far more than racing. With their rugged but relatively lightweight craftsmanship, they could take "someone who is housebound and put them in the beauty of nature." Muir asked if the Garners could build carriages large enough to carry several wheelchairs at once. They set to work, and in 2005 Access Adventure staged its first outing.

Recently, on that summer afternoon at Rush Ranch, Muir demonstrated the healing power of the great outdoors by inviting a companion onto his carriage's driver seat, an 18-year-old named William Stewart, who has cystic fibrosis. Stewart took a carriage ride awhile back and asked if he could volunteer by caring for the horses. Muir, recognizing a kindred soul, agreed. Stewart now comes once a week to clean, harness and, when lucky, drive the towering, patient animals who make Access Adventure happen. Muir handed the reins to Stewart, who grinned, then prodded the horses into motion. "Steady; pull a little to the left," Muir said. "Good. You've got it!"

When the carriage returned to the barn, Muir lowered himself to the ground, leaning on a cane. Even in that posture he appeared an outdoorsman, his skin creased by the sun. He fingered his bushy mustache and looked across a nearby field, where Stewart had taken one of the horses and was now running with it through the long, waving grass. Before coming to Rush Ranch, Stewart's mom said, her son was so despondent he rarely roused himself from the sofa. John Muir once wrote, "The heart of the mountains is...the song of God." A century later, Muir's great-grandson is showing that God can use the mountains, and all of nature, to bring hope and healing. "It's the power of nature," said Muir. "It heals all of us." ■

For more on this story, see Family Room.