

LAKE COUNTY RECORD-BEE

FRIDAY, April 21, 2007

Non-profit offers carriage rides for people with disabilities



Access Adventure, a non-profit that offers carriage rides to people with disabilities, will visit Kelseyville this weekend at the Cole Creek Equestrian Center. Founder Michael Muir, pictured, is disabled himself. Contributed photos

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The horse drawn carriage is wheelchair accessible.

Kelseyville >> Michael Muir has lived with multiple sclerosis since the age of 15, and it's never stopped him from doing what he loves: driving horses. He's traveled all over the world with his animals, from France to Germany, Great Britain to Australia. In 2014 he made a trek across the United States, from California to Florida, driving from his seat in his wheelchair.

Even before his diagnosis, horses had always been a large part of Muir's life — he'd started breeding them at the age of 12 — and that never changed. "I've enjoyed a very active life all over the world because of my connection to my horses and how they've helped compensate for my lost function," he said.

Over time he realized that without the animals, he would never have been able to lead such a high quality of life, and he wanted to share the joy horses had given him. In 2004, after serving three years as the President of United States Driving for the Disabled, Muir returned to his home in the Bay Area and began Access Adventure, a non-profit that provides outdoor recreation for people with disabilities.

"We provide a kind of unique way of seeing the world for those who cannot ordinarily access it," Muir explained.

And starting today, Access Adventure will be at the Cole Creek Equestrian Center in Kelseyville, offering rides in their 12-passenger carriage. With a wheelchair lift and removable seats, the carriage is easily accessible for anyone mobility challenged. Access Adventure is also entirely free of charge.

They're here to serve anyone who has trouble visiting the outdoors, not just those in wheelchairs. Their current focus is on disabled veterans, particularly the younger ones. Muir

and the entire team at Access Adventure want to help soldiers piece their lives back together after suffering an injury.

They also encourage family members to come out for a carriage ride, since disabilities can sometimes restrict the activities people are able to do together.

“Whether you’re born with a disability or for whatever reason you might not be accessing nature and the healing power of getting outside, our doors are open to you,” Muir said.

Horses have long been used as a type of therapy for people with disabilities, for a variety of different reasons. Someone with autism may find the presence of a horse soothing, and find socialization in spending time with the animal. Riding a horse can help ease spasms in children with cerebral palsy and help them walk better.

Cole Creek Equestrian Center owners Joanne and John Van Eck traveled with Muir across the US three years ago. During a stop in Arizona, they witnessed first hand the healing power of horses, when Muir invited young children in wheelchairs to try their hand at driving his wagon.

“It was like giving them freedom, to be able to turn left and right,” said Joanne Van Eck. “They didn’t need to use their feet for breaks.”

But Muir isn’t a medical professional, and though he’s worked with doctors and he’s interested in the therapeutic aspects of horses, Access Adventure is more about getting outdoors, having fun and enjoying a unique activity. While in Kelseyville, the carriage will travel through Clear Lake State Park and into downtown Kelseyville, where some wine tasting may ensue.

“For many people this just a way to break out of the routine existence of their life,” Muir said. “Ultimately I just want people to enjoy the quality of their life. If we can help with that then I feel like we’re successful.”

Access Adventure is one of a kind in that it caters to a large group of people with disabilities. There are many programs that offer horse therapy, but most are one-on-one. Muir’s organization accommodates a dozen individuals. And the entire thing is kept running by a crew of 50 volunteers. Not one person involved is a paid worker.

Although the non-profit is something of an anomaly at the moment, Muir began the organization with the hope that others would follow his lead. He wanted Access Adventure to serve as a regional model, and demonstrate how this type of work can be done anywhere.

“Wherever we go we like to show this and if there are people who are interested we’d like to help them get started,” Muir said.

Access Adventure arrives in Kelseyville this afternoon. They will be offering rides at Cole Creek Equestrian Center on Friday and Saturday. Carriage rides are free. To set up a ride, call Muir at 707-999-1419. The equestrian center is located at 4965 Steelhead Dr.