

# Learn horsemanship and life skills at Rock Ranch

By Jill Fennema

Rock Ranch, located west of Hills, Minn, is a place where good horsemanship is taught, alongside other valuable life skills.

This non-profit organization was organized in 2016, by Marie and Dan La Rock. Marie had a long-time love of horses, having grown up on a farm a few miles south of where the Rock Ranch facilities and the La Rock family farm is located. When she was a young girl, she often enjoyed being able to go out riding around the family farm.

Marie has also worked in area schools as a speech pathologist and has a love for working with children.

"I had felt the calling for years," she said. But it was not until her children were in high school that she made the decision to pursue that calling – to build a non-profit organization that could teach people how to ride horse, along with a host of other skills and perceptions that come along with spending time with intelligent animals.

Rock Ranch has three main programs that they offer. The first is called "Ride Rock Ranch" and it is one of their most used programs. It is a basic horsemanship class for students ages 6 to 17. It is properly defined as equine assisted learning and education.

Rock Ranch owns a dozen horses, but they only use about five "Big Shooters" as she calls them, for this class. Each class meets once a week for eight weeks. The horses and all the tack and riding gear necessary are provided by the ranch. Students can simply show up with a willingness to learn.

This class is divided up into skill levels, with three to four students per class period. Each rider has a volunteer that assists them with the class and each class has an instructor.

Classes are held after school during the fall, winter, and spring and morning hours during the summer. Prior to 2019, classes were held outdoors at the couple's farm. Weather often hindered classes, so they decided to expand the business and built the indoor riding arena, which has created the opportunity to grow their services.

When the students arrive for class after school, the first thing they do is grab their helmet and meet with their volunteer and the horse they ride. They learn how to saddle and bridle the horse, and use all the tack that goes along with riding a horse. After their ride, they learn how to properly groom the horse.

In the arena, which is an 80' x 120' building with a soft, sand floor, the teacher gives instructions and the volunteers help the students complete the tasks. For the youngest, most inexperienced riders, the volunteer also has a rope-hold on the horse at all times. More experienced students do not require this safety measure.

The tasks that the students perform while astride their horse are aimed at helping them learn how to maneuver a horse around the arena, controlling the horse – including getting the horse to stop or go – and guide the horse through various courses.

For example, the instructor may hand out various animal cards and ask the student to bring the card to a place in the arena that has been labeled as that animal's habitat. Another riding game involves being the "Pony Express" and bringing letters to several mailboxes placed around the arena.

The games may be simple, but they were designed to make the students think and learn, all the while that they learn how to sit correctly on their horse and guide the horse around the arena.

Marie has actually developed a curriculum to use in the horsemanship program and she hopes to make that curriculum available to other horse riding programs.

Throughout the class period, as the students perform their various tasks, they encounter question cards. The questions – (an example of one could be "If you could go anywhere in the world right now, where would you go?") are designed to help the volunteer engage the student in conversation. In this way, the student is



Cindy Bobb works with Nora Lunning and her horse Lucky in the "Ride Rock Ranch" program.

not only learning horsemanship, he or she is also learning social interaction skills.

"They are always learning something," Marie said. "They just don't know they are learning."

Marie has found volunteers for her programs at local high schools. She has simply asked students who are not already involved in other programs or athletics if they want to help out and spend time around horses.

Some volunteers are students who have gone through the program and have become experienced riders, while others are grandparents or parents who are interested in helping. One of her volunteers is Cindy Bobb, who has years of horse riding experience under her belt.

The Ride Rock Ranch class is held twice per school year: for eight weeks in October and November and for eight weeks in January and February.

Last year in March, Marie started a women's riding program. That program is just getting off the ground, but she hopes to develop that more fully because she has found that it was well received.

Summer is especially busy at the ranch. During the summer months they have 65 to 75 students who come out for a week of riding. They ride Monday through Thursday for an hour each day.

Marie especially enjoys the summer because they can get out of the arena and ride the trails around their farm some of the time.

Another program that Rock Ranch offers is called Senior Saddles. This program allows seniors to get back in the saddle and connect with their memories of being on the farm.

This is a two-hour experience that starts in the conference room with coffee and cookies, socializing and talking about horses and horsemanship. From there they move into the arena where the seniors can interact with the horses. Those that are able, are allowed to ride. Marie has had five people over 90 years old get back into the saddle after many years of not riding.

She said that sometimes those individuals might not remember yesterday's activities, but getting back on a horse jogs their memories from long ago.

The third program that Rock Ranch offers is equine assisted

counseling. This program is not really a riding program as much as it is a counseling session where horses help a person through a difficult time in a very unique way.

These sessions always involve a licensed counselor and an equine specialist. Marie is a member of Arenas for Change (ARCH), the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) and the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship (PATH). During these sessions, Marie says clients are invited to observe the natural herd behavior of horses and to begin to formulate a story based on their observations. Each client develops a unique story that ends up representing something that relates to their personal life. With the help of the counselor and equine specialist, clients are able to start, share, and experience their story. This facilitation technique allows clients the freedom to change and edit their story as the environment changes around them.

Studies show that equine-assisted therapy has been beneficial to people suffering from trauma, addiction, depression, and a wide variety of other issues.

Rock Ranch is a non-profit organization. It relies on donations for about half their operating expenses each year. On the wall in their conference room is a list of all those who have helped bring the dream of Rock Ranch to fruition and continue to help keep it running each year.

Marie is the equine specialist and Dan handles the business duties such as marketing and fundraising.

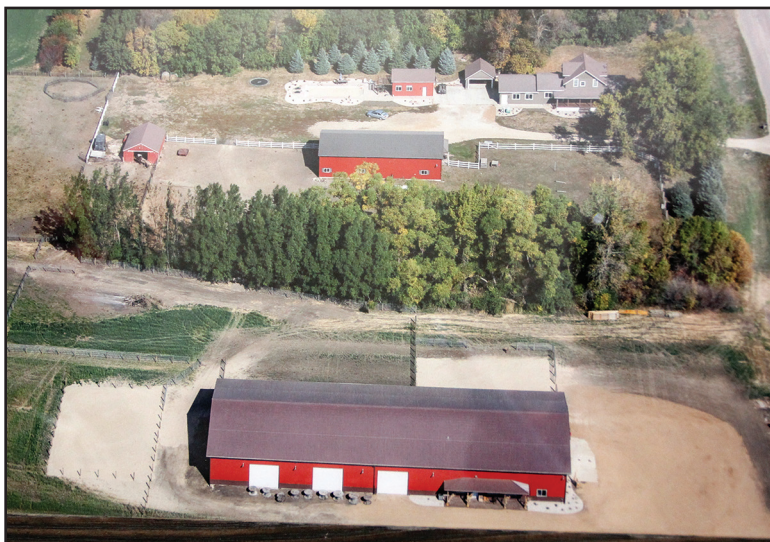
The La Rocks include a Christian element to their programs. Each year they choose a verse as their theme for the year. This year the verse is, "Do not be afraid, I am with you! I am your God - let nothing terrify you! I will make you strong and help you; I will protect you and save you." Isaiah 41:10

The La Rocks are also involved in helping in their community. In early March they will be hosting a tack-swap benefit fundraiser. All the money raised will go to help the Mark and Lisa Ehlers family from Luverne and the Tanya Fey family from Pipestone. To donate items for the silent auction or participate in the tack sale, information is included in the ad in this issue of the *On The Farm*.

This event will be held on Saturday, March 5, at 8 a.m. There will be a food stand provided by the 4-H Western Heritage and 4-H Horse Families as well.



Paula Ward works with Asher Buckland to review how to remove the horse's saddle.



The LaRock's farm in the background and the new riding arena in the foreground. Prior to building the arena, riding classes took place in the grassy area near the LaRock's barn.