

# Horsemanship is only the start at Rock Ranch

By Kyle Kuphal

In 2016, Dan and Marie LaRock founded Rock Ranch northwest of Hills in southwest Rock County as a 501c3 nonprofit organization geared toward teaching young people to ride horses.

"We just wanted to give people access to quality horsemanship instruction at the entry level," Dan said.

Rock Ranch offers basic horsemanship training for children ages 5 to 17. The small group lessons focus on haltering, grooming, leading, tacking and riding. The primary focus of the class is to teach horsemanship, but Marie also infuses the lessons with activities that help the youth improve themselves physically, cognitively, socially and psychologically.

"The first couple of years was really focused on kids' lessons," Dan said. "And it still is."

They have, however, added other programs, starting with the SeniorSaddles program in 2018. The program provides an opportunity for people 55 and older to participate in horse-related activities. Typically, that involves a tour of the ranch, spending time with the horses and socializing. Occasionally, it also involves a senior getting up on a horse.

That program has been put on hold this year by the pandemic.

Last year, Rock Ranch added a counseling element to its services. Marie and two other mental health practitioners are certified by the Equine Assisted

Growth and Learning Association (Eagala), an international nonprofit association for mental health professionals who use horses to address mental health and personal development needs.

"Everything there is done on the ground," Marie said. "There is no riding."

She said the counselor will talk to the client and use the

for any other kind of therapy such as couples or family therapy, or even business sessions.

"Anybody can come to those counseling sessions," Marie said.

Currently, the LaRocks are in the process of adding an 80-by-190-foot building with an 80-by-120-foot riding arena that will allow them to offer their services rain or shine all year round.

Now they typically offer lessons from May through October when the weather allows, which has led to a waiting list of around 15 to 20 families each year and waits of up to nine months. They're hoping the ability to provide their services all year round will eliminate the waiting list.

"It should," Dan said.

Construction of the nearly \$700,000 structure has been made possible through many generous donations and sponsorships for which the LaRocks said they are very thankful. Dan

said they have received over 70 gifts from people in six states who have given amounts ranging from \$2 to \$125,000. Most of the gifts have been in the \$2,500 to \$5,000 range. He said there will be a donor reception and public viewing of the arena building at the end of September.

horse and the scene of the ranch around them as metaphors. She said the surroundings can be relaxing and help in their counseling. They might also have a client take on a chore at the ranch — such as moving horses from one area to another — that could teach them something about themselves.

"It's experiential," Marie said. "It can be pretty impactful for people."

Marie said the therapy can be helpful for people with post traumatic stress disorder and that they use it in their work with Call to Freedom, an organization that works with human trafficking victims. It can also be used



A new arena is being built at Rock Ranch near Hills. The arena is expected to be completed later this year and will include a conference room, offices and more in addition to the riding area. K. Kuphal



Three of the nine horses grab a bite to eat. K. Kuphal



This is the outdoor arena used for horsemanship lessons. The ranch offers the lessons for children, a senior citizen program and a counseling program. K. Kuphal



Dan and Marie LaRock founded Rock Ranch near Hills in 2016 and have continued to add to its services since then. K. Kuphal

When it's done the building will include the arena, a conference room with teleconferencing capabilities and a kitchen, bathrooms, a donor wall, offices, a history display about the ranch, merchandise for sale, storage areas and more. While their plan for now is to continue to offer their existing programs in the arena, they are open to other opportunities as well.

"I don't know what else will transpire," Dan said.

Last year Rock Ranch had 300 visitors who participated in 122 lessons, 50 SeniorSaddles visits and 25 counseling sessions. Dan said about 65 to 70 percent of their time is spent on lessons, 20 percent is spent on counseling and the rest is spent on the SeniorSaddles program in a typical year. He said Rock Ranch's clients primarily come from South Dakota, Minnesota and Iowa.

For those who are interested in Rock Ranch's services, but can't afford them, they do offer a sliding fee scale and scholarships.

"We are not in the business of turning people away," Dan said.

The LaRocks include a Christ-based theme based on a different

Bible verse each year. This year's theme is, "Be still and know that I am God," from Psalm 46:10. Marie said they thought that might be a fitting verse this year due to the pandemic.

Marie grew up with horses and has always enjoyed them. She said her grandfather was a horseman and that her first time riding was at the century farm that is now Rock Ranch. She has a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in speech language pathology from Minnesota State University - Moorhead. She has provided speech therapy and instruction in schools in southwest Minnesota since 2001.

Dan is a shareholder at Hub Great Plains, a company that helps large employers in the upper Midwest with employee retirement plans and health benefits. He handles the marketing and fundraising for Rock Ranch.

He said their combined skill sets that God has blessed them with have helped make Rock Ranch what it is.

For more information on Rock Ranch visit [www.riderockranch.org](http://www.riderockranch.org).

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