



A miniature pony named Spirit (below) is popular among Rock Ranch's visitors, including Dorothy Sikma (center) and Nels Benson because of his small size.



Henrietta Bajema (above) cuddles with Skunks, the cat.

Mavis Fodness photos/1011 Senior Saddles

"Spaghetti Eddie" sloppily consumes oats as Rock Ranch owner Marie LaRock (center) and volunteer Dolores Bundeson (far right) watch Tuff Village resident Roger Schneekloth get an up-close look at the tall horse.

Grant expands Rock Ranch's mission to senior citizens

By Mavis Fodness

In its inaugural year, Rock Ranch near Hills taught 50 children horseback riding skills.

As the ranch wraps up its second year, owner Marie LaRock is expanding her program to include senior citizens.

The Rock Ranch recently received a \$500 grant through the Luverne Area Community Foundation to market and promote the program.

"We would like to get more senior citizens out to ride," she said. "Research shows riding can help with balance and social interactions."

LaRock calls the developing program "Senior Saddles" and is looking to partner with area nursing homes and assisted living facilities.

"After we generate awareness and interest in this program, we will be able to identify needs more effectively," she said.

Horseback riding was the focus of Rock

Ranch when it was established in 2016.

While some senior citizens are able to ride a horse, there are plenty of positive effects from simply visiting a farm.

During a recent visit by Tuff Memorial Home and Tuff Village, residents petted and brushed the animals and reminisced about living on a farm, according to social services director Carol Gehrke.

"The whole farm was just awesome," she said. "The experience brought back so many memories for them."

John Sikma is a new resident of the Tuff Village assisted living apartments.

While he stroked a horse's soft muzzle, the retired farmer shared his fond memories of riding and using workhorses.

"My dad didn't like tractors so everything was done with horses," he said.

Sikma chuckled at a memory of a cartoon that could be a depiction of his brother and dad working on a stalled tractor while Sikma himself worked the fields

with a team of reliable horses.

"I didn't hate tractors like my dad did," he said.

Nine horses are now stabled at the Rock Ranch, up from six in its first year.

Pet cats and dogs are also at home at the ranch and are available for interaction with visitors, but it's the interaction with horses that make up a possible traveling Senior Saddles program.

LaRock said the gentle equines could be brought to residents in their facilities, depending if volunteers are available to assist.

Last year, 10 volunteers assisted LaRock primarily at the farm.

"Volunteers help manage the horses and act as safety aids during lessons and interactions at Rock Ranch," she said.

For more information about the Senior Saddles program or to volunteer, contact LaRock at 605-929-9291 or by email marie@riderockranch.org.