



SOUL Buddies Animal Therapy Club members meet at an after school training session at SOUL Harbour Ranch. From left: Kristina Duffy with Charmer, Ilaria Tuluce with Marshall, and Dasha Duffy with Mystery.

The Comforting Angels of SOUL Harbour Ranch

SMALL, GENTLE, and guided by devoted handlers, certified miniature therapy horse Mystery makes her way quietly through the spacious halls of JourneyCare in Barrington. She has quite a retinue, including hospice volunteers and a few therapy dogs. Mystery has a very self-contained demeanor. Strictly with the consent of a patient and their family, she is led to a bedside where she will spend a few minutes in communion with those who welcome her. Their secrets and their prayers are safe with her, and maybe their whispered memories of treasured animal companions, too.

The provider of this special visit is SOUL Harbour Ranch Animal Therapy Program,

located in the Barrington countryside. The visit to JourneyCare was supervised by Jodie Diegel, (R.N., M.B.A.), the founder and owner of SOUL Harbour Ranch, along with her husband, Jerry Diegel. Today, she has some new, younger helpers.

Mystery is led by a Barrington High School student who has joined the new club formed by Diegel at Barrington High School, SOUL Buddies Animal Therapy Club. The students find satisfaction in working with the miniature horses and dogs, preparing them for therapy visits in different environments within the community. It is a partnership of open hearts, gentle creatures, and dedication. Diegel also founded Mane in Heaven several years ago, where her certified miniature

therapy horses served for six years. Those horses have now joined the equine team at SOUL Harbour Ranch.

TRAINING AT THE RANCH

A few days after the JourneyCare visit, it is cold, wet, and snowy outside. After a walk across the SOUL Harbour Ranch field towards the complex of barns, nine tiny horses, including Mystery, stroll over to the fence to greet and nuzzle their visitors. Lunar, Turnabout, Faith, Cream Puff, Grace, Charmer, CinderBella, and Cupcake are their "call names". Many have a full pedigree registration. There are also four miniature donkeys—Bugsy, Princess, Prancer, and Carma.

Two regular sized horses, Garth and Stitch,



Ilaria Tuluze walks Dudley, a certified therapy dog, at BHS.



SOUL Harbour Ranch Animal Therapy Program founder Jodie Diegel (on left) and Kristina Duffy (sitting, left) bring certified therapy dogs Buffett and Dudley to BHS for after school training for SOUL Buddies Animal Therapy Club.

complete this equine family. Along this afternoon are the Duffy sisters, both riders, who belong to SOUL Buddies. They will train with two of the miniatures, including helping them to follow basic commands similar to those which dogs learn, except of course to “sit”! All training is done according to the standards of Pet Partners, which is the only nationally recognized organization for certifying therapy equines.

AN IMPRESSIVE THERAPY REACH

Besides the SOUL Buddies, Diegel assists in taking the little horses, usually two or three at a time, and occasionally therapy dogs, on a staggering number of visits. In 2018, they brought comfort and joy to people at Rush Children’s Hospital, Ronald McDonald House, Loyola Medical Center, and the Hines VA. Their merry presence brightened “Walk with Me” at Lake Barrington Shores, and the residents at Little Sisters of the Poor, St. Joseph’s Home for the Elderly, The Garlands of Barrington, Arboria of Long Grove, and the Abilities Expo at the Schaumburg Convention Center. Visits have also been made at the Barrington Area Library, Barrington Cruise Nights, National Night Out at the Barrington Fire Department, and the Barrington Dance Ensemble’s Under the Big Top Benefit at the Sanfilippo Estate.

The entire herd was greeted enthusiastically



Kristina Duffy guides a certified therapy horse to Jodie Diegel, who is seated to mimic someone in a wheelchair, as part of a “visit” training exercise.

as they took part in the Barrington Fourth of July Parade last summer. Most recently, they trotted cheerfully along as they joined the WGN Thanksgiving Day Parade. During stops they visited with the crowd, joined by SOUL Buddies Therapy Dog partners from MAST, the Masonic Association of Service and Therapy Dogs, some of whom had joined in that earlier JourneyCare visit.

Diegel has plans to expand the outreach of SOUL Harbour Ranch Animal Therapy Program, and SOUL Buddies, to include special programs

and group visits to the Ranch. The logistics and expenses of maintaining her organization are extensive. The SOUL Harbour Ranch Animal Therapy Program is a registered 501(c)3 nonprofit. Looking at its website with photographs of therapy visits is an essay in itself, a testament to the enduring bonds between humans and their helpful animal companions.

To learn more about SOUL Harbour Ranch Animal Therapy Program, visit online at www.SOULHarbourRanch.com.^U