



Trainers, horses & riders at ManeGait (above); Christopher Williams at home in the saddle (right)  
photos by Chris Fritchie

## Changing Lives One Horse at a Time

By Kim Kurth

**THE PHRASE** “cowboy up” takes on a whole new meaning at a 14-acre horse ranch in McKinney. For those not familiar with it, the term refers to a shift in attitude from “can’t” to “can-do” with a non-complaining spirit that’s contagious. The riders who come here face a wide range of challenges that can make even the simplest tasks seem insurmountable. But amazing transformations happen at this ranch, which itself was transformed less than two years ago into a therapeutic riding center called ManeGait. “The kids out here have this air of confidence that says ‘Look at me. I can do anything. This is my horse and I’m on top of the world,’” says Donna Newsome, the mother of a 6-year-old boy who’s been riding at ManeGait for five months.

“The first day I brought Gordon here he was kicking, screaming, biting, pulling hair and the horse’s mane. But the horse didn’t move. He was calm, cool and collected. I thought ‘wow, this is amazing,’” says Ms.

Newsome. Remembering back to when her son first began exhibiting unusual behavior, Ms. Newsome adds, “At first, I just thought Gordon had some weird little quirks and then one day it hit hard. When you find out your child is autistic, you think you are the only one with a child facing these kinds of issues. When you’re out in the real world people look at you like you can’t control your child. Then you come here and you realize you’re not alone. The people here at ManeGait understand my child’s issues and don’t judge him.”

“What’s really neat is that when your child arrives at ManeGait they really feel welcome,” says Diana Williams, who brings her 5-year-old son, Christopher, from their home in Wylie to ride every Saturday. “My son has a sensory processing disorder that kind of mirrors autism. It’s very nice to see people who aren’t in your situation actually understanding your situation. There’s no judgment passed on your child’s behavior here and that’s such



a big deal for us.”

ManeGait is focused on helping children like Christopher and Gordon, as well as adults with various types of disabilities. The need is great in North Texas where there are more than 600,000 people over the age of five living with disabilities.

So how did ManeGait come to be? Bill and Priscilla Darling believe it was their calling; a mission planted in their hearts by God. “We bought this land a few years ago,” says Mrs. Darling, who began riding horses at the age of three. “When I would come up here to ride I would envision families everywhere, little kids and lots of happiness and warmth. It was something that was totally in my heart.”

Diving into a project like ManeGait isn’t anything new for the Darlings. The two of them see helping other people as a way of life. They are very involved with



Bill & Priscilla Darling combined their love for children and horses to create ManeGait.

photo by Chris Fritch

organizations and charities that help kids, such as Children's Medical Center in Plano and the Children's Advocacy Center. For years, their company, Darling Homes, has been building homes for Habitat for Humanity. The company also built the Samaritan Inn, an apartment complex where people can live for a period of time while trying to get back on their feet. The Darlings live by the principle that what we have in this life is not ours to keep; we're to use our blessings to help others.

When they made the decision two years ago to build a therapeutic center, the Darlings thought it would take about three years to pull it all together. Incredibly, the center opened in less than nine months. Mrs. Darling credits the rapid start-up to God's grace and a phone call she received one day from a very special woman. "I knew there would be someone in the industry who would want to take somebody else's dream and financials and run with it. That person turned out to be Lili Kellogg." The Darlings hired Ms. Kellogg as ManeGait's director. She has more than 20 years of experience and is one of approximately 30 master-level therapeutic instructors in the country.

"Horses were my passion growing up," says Ms. Kellogg. "To be able to combine that love of horses with helping people – well, it just doesn't get any better."

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Ms. Kellogg has been with ManeGait from day one. "It's proving to be a very effective program for people with disabilities," she says, adding that this is true for several reasons. "First, there's the physical standpoint. If you take someone who has an atypical body—their soft tissue and orthopedic structures don't work as they should. When you put a human being on a horse, the way the horse moves

forces the body into the patterns needed to work properly." Ms. Kellogg says that the motion of riding a horse stimulates the muscles and vestibular system, thus, improving the rider's balance and core strength. "I also see improvements in emotional, behavioral and social areas. When you can't play soccer, take ballet or have piano recitals like the other kids, but you can learn to ride a horse, that's pretty significant. When you have a disability and so many things are beyond your control, yet you can learn to control a 1200-pound animal – that's huge. So much confidence is gained by learning those skills." But, she says, there's more to it than just the human factor. "Horses are non-judgmental. They don't care if you're missing an arm or you talk funny. As long as you treat them with respect and consistency, they will respond favorably. So from a behavioral standpoint, to get positive feedback just because you're being nice is a good thing."

Apparently a lot of people agree, the program began with four riders in July 2008, today there are 86 people at different stages – all learning to ride. "Many of them begin with three volunteers around them: a horse leader and two

Lili Kellogg, *ManeGait* director (right)  
photo by Chris Frutchie

side-walkers," says Ms. Kellogg. "Safety is priority number one, but our riders need to become as independent as possible because they don't need one more person telling them they need help doing something. So, as the rider progresses safely we start peeling away their levels of support and eventually get down to the rider doing it all independently. In some cases complete independence may never be reached, but it is something we strive for with each rider."

Ms. Kellogg oversees five other instructors, 15 horses and more than 500 trained volunteers who keep the riding center operating day in and day out. Debbie Anderson is one of those volunteers. "I grew up doing 4-H and other things like that. It's great to be able to do something I enjoy, plus I'm helping the kids." Volunteer Alexis Newburn, a high school freshman, concurs. "I get just as much out of this as the kids do," she says. "Seeing all the riders grow and develop is really great." That progress doesn't go unnoticed by instructors like Jaelyn Hyde. "You can see so much growth in the riders from when they first come out to when they end a session of classes. You get to watch the parents see the changes in their children. It's so amazing to watch and be a part of," says Ms. Hyde.

Testimonials are offered on a regular basis by parents whose children ride at *ManeGait*. "It has really changed my daughter's life," says Mike Carter, father of 9-year-old Christianna. "I wasn't aware of the therapeutic benefits of horseback riding. After I started hearing about it and reading about it, I thought this would be a perfect fit for her. We've seen an increase in her confidence and with what she's learning to do on a horse. It's improving her coordination. Plus, she's having a blast doing this." Christianna often asks her father to come out to the ranch just to make sure the horses are okay. Diana Williams also says her son can't wait to come see his horse every Saturday morning. "We did this just for fun and didn't ever think he would get so much out of it," says Mrs. Williams. "You don't see a drastic change right off the bat. But when it hits, it's like everything just starts coming together. Now, Christopher can



tell me what he wants instead of me having to guess all the time. Now he's a very happy child."

Stories like those fill Priscilla and Bill Darling with joy, but they admit they were shocked when they started hearing about how quickly riders were progressing. Mrs. Darling witnessed one of those special moments the first time she met little Gordon and his mother. "I saw them standing over by the barn by themselves, so I walked over to him and his mother, started talking and having fun. I didn't know that the reason they were standing by themselves was because he can't handle a lot of people around him. Out of the blue, the little boy reached out and grabbed hold of my hand. I just held his hand and stayed there with him. Then, Gordon asked me if I would walk him out to get on his horse. The whole time his mother is just freaking out, worried about what her son was going to do. After I came back, she told me that nothing like that had ever happened before and she couldn't believe

it," says Mrs. Darling. "Once Gordon got up on his horse, all the staff ran over to me and said you just don't know what a miracle just happened." It was a miracle that didn't go unnoticed by Gordon's mother. "I told Mrs. Darling that, for the first time, I'm getting to see who my child is," says Ms. Newsome. "I can tell Gordon is confident. Now he expresses himself and tells me how he's feeling instead of acting out. And, that all just clicked when we started doing the horse therapy."

Priscilla Darling knows the wonders of horses. "There's no bigger passion in my life than riding a horse. And to give these kids this gift - an hour out of their day where they can just lose themselves in a really, really happy time - means so much," says Mrs. Darling. "I can look back at my entire life now and know it was all leading to this. I'm just so thankful that my husband and I listened to our calling."

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