



Reins of Life

Can a horse teach you life skills? For Reins of Life riders, the answer is a resounding “yes.”

Reins of Life, Inc. is a nonprofit based in South Bend and Michigan City, Indiana. The organization provides therapeutic horseback riding sessions to children and adults with cognitive and physical disabilities.

As of 2023, more than 500 riders from 11 counties in Michigan and Indiana participate in Reins of Life’s programs. The organization needs lots of money and equipment to meet that kind of demand—so when it came time to purchase a new, reliable horse trailer, they turned to MEC’s Building Vibrant Communities grant program. Thanks in part to one of our community grants, funded by partnership dollars through our power supplier Wolverine Power Cooperative, Reins of Life was able to buy a new trailer that would help minimize interruptions to therapy sessions and guarantee timely transport to the veterinarian in case of emergencies.

Horses are the basis for all the important work that happens at Reins of Life. Riders with physical disabilities get to strengthen muscles they wouldn’t otherwise use, while those in need of behavioral support are able to practice skills like empathy, self-confidence, and communication. A sizable team of volunteers, some of whom are program alumni themselves, ensures that each rider gets the attention they deserve. Riders are encouraged to participate actively in caring for the horse they choose—for example, as part of her treatment, one rider developed a new, more efficient feeding process that the organization uses to this day. Even the most mundane aspects of caretaking are treated as a teaching opportunity, with saddles organized by a system that helps riders work on their color identification and counting skills.

Currently, the organization is spearheaded by Dorota Janik, Ph.D. Initially just a volunteer, Janik quickly realized she had stumbled onto something special.

“I was working with a girl who was nonverbal,” Janik said. “She would give her horse one tap for ‘walk’ and two taps for ‘whoa.’ On her last week, she was getting ready to ride, and she said out loud, ‘Walk.’ I was crying; her parents were crying when we told them.”

While demand for Reins of Life’s programs continues to grow, Janik says her focus for the immediate future is to continue attracting volunteers while making smaller, necessary upgrades like the horse trailer along the way.

To learn more about Reins of Life, including how to get involved, visit reinsoflife.org or find them on Facebook at Reins of Life—Therapeutic horseback riding, Twitter at [@reinsoflifeinc](https://twitter.com/reinsoflifeinc), or Instagram at [@reins_of_life_inc](https://www.instagram.com/reins_of_life_inc).

