Great Strides to Change Lives

It is uncertain exactly how long horseback riding has been used as a form of therapy. Some sources say it goes back to ancient Greece, but no matter how old it is, riding has proven beneficial to a rider’s health and well-being. At Ironwood Springs Christian Ranch near Rochester, Minn., they welcome riders of all abilities including those with physical, mental, emotional, behavioral and learning disabilities.

A horse in the hands of a trained and capable instructor like University of Minnesota, Crookston Alumna Courtney (Sonnek) Mohler, ’07, provides riders at the ranch the opportunity to learn more than just riding skills. Mohler, a wrangler at Ironwood Springs, teaches riders about grooming, horsemanship and the work associated with caring for a horse. She is also available to riders with special needs.

Mohler is licensed by the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA) which means she has been through a rigorous certification process that includes 25 hours of teaching under a certified instructor and traveling to Missouri for a 3-day certification process.

“I could not have passed the tests without the training I received at the U of M, Crookston,” Mohler explains. “My involvement in the Intercollegiate Horse Show Association gave me experience with riding and competing on horses I was unfamiliar with and that has proven invaluable.”

In the summer Mohler spends her days with horses and riders; in the winter you can find her working around the ranch, hosting groups and assisting in the office.

Mohler grew up on a farm near Minnesota Lake, Minn., a town of just under 700 south of Mankato. She attended the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities where she received her bachelor’s degree in family social science. Mohler chose to complete an equine degree at the University of Minnesota, Crookston because she says, “I could stay in the U of M system and everything would transfer.”

It was in the equine industries management program at the U of M, Crookston where she focused her attention on riding and the care of horses. “Nicky Overgaard was my riding instructor, and she taught me so much,” Mohler states. “I learned confidence and gained important hands-on experience.” What she learned on the Crookston campus is something she values.

“I can’t emphasize enough what a big difference small classes make,” Mohler reflects. “Students have a great advantage when the class sizes are small and interaction with the instructors takes place all the time.”

Mohler hopes to develop a therapeutic riding program at Ironwood Springs in 2008. As busy as she is, that might be an ambitious goal, but one she is determined to make happen.

“I am working at my dream job,” Mohler says. “I understand the connection that takes place between a horse and rider. Once I saw that connection in a child’s eyes, I knew just where I wanted to be, and here I am.”