

Meet Dustee, Equine Spirit Sanctuary's therapy horse

By Ruth Bourgeois

The past couple weeks of early spring-like weather has prompted a few calls already from people asking about our programs for special needs kids. Even though the weather is warm now, it takes a lot to prepare the horses, the arena and the volunteers for the programs.

We'll be doing volunteer training in May every Wednesday afternoon from 1 to about 3 p.m. Anyone who wants to assist with the therapeutic riding and equine-assisted learning programs is welcome to, but they must attend at least three of the training sessions. This includes past volunteers also. We work hard to make sure our helpers, both human and equine, are as well trained as possible.

Rupert Issacson, author of "The Horse Boy" book, will be in Taos for a book signing of his new book, "The Long Road Home," and showing of "The Horse Boy" documentary film. This event, scheduled for Tuesday (March 1) at El Monte Sagrado, is not affiliated with Equine Spirit Sanctuary (ESS), but we hope that everyone interested can attend and learn more about Issacson's work. Watch for more info in *The Taos News*.

With the warmer weather, we've had more visitors than usual for this time of the year. Many people have asked about Dustee, who is wearing support wraps on his front legs.

Dustee apparently slipped on the ice the first week of January and tore a suspenso-



Courtesy photo

Dustee

ry ligament on his right front leg. He was very sore for a few weeks and has been on stall rest with limited turnout since then. It is slowly healing.

It was a nasty injury, but we are optimistic that Dustee will make a full recovery. He is our super star therapy horse, as well as the hardest-working horse at every open house we've had here at ESS. Countless kids (and even several adults) have had their first horse ride on Dustee. He is the oldest horse at ESS, celebrating his 27th birthday in April. We have been gradually easing him into retirement, but he is still everyone's favorite.

People sometimes ask me how long it takes to train a horse, like Dustee, to be such a good therapy and riding horse. That is a hard to explain. Some horses, like Dustee, just naturally have a calm, people-loving attitude. Dustee had several years as a competitive horse, in distance trail rides and dres-

sage schooling shows when he was younger, which exposed him to a huge variety of different places, activities, traveling a lot, learning to focus under endless distractions. He was never pushed to do things he was not ready for or comfortable with, so he matured with confidence and a sense of self-worth that has resulted in a safe, obedient and well-mannered horse that enjoys interacting with people, especially children.

We have several other horses in our program that have also worked out very well. The main criteria is that they are quiet, gentle, easygoing and not easily spooked. We spend a lot of time teaching the horses to stand quietly while playing games of catch with balls and stuffed toys, tossing things over their heads and all around them. They learn to follow voice commands and body language.

But aside from this extra training, it seems like the best therapy horses are those that simply love being a part of the program – those that seem to know they are doing an important job and understand that kids and people with disabilities are special, and they are proud to be entrusted with that responsibility.

Open days for visitors and volunteers are Tuesday, Wednesday and Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. For more information, call Equine Spirit Sanctuary, (575) 758-1212, or go to www.equinespiritsanctuary.org or www.facebook.com/equinespiritsanctuary.