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# Mini Therapy Horses

By Victoria Nodiff-Netanel

Mini Therapy Horses  
founder Victoria  
Nodiff-Netanel.

*Though small  
in stature, the  
miniature horses at  
this organization  
make a big difference  
helping children  
and adults through  
challenging times.*

Photos courtesy of Carla Acevedo-Blumenkrantz

Many of us like-minded souls have found comfort and companionship with our beloved four-legged friends. I know that is true for me. From the furry pals of childhood to the miniature horses that make up the team at Mini Therapy Horses, animals have been a key part of my journey. So how did a love of animals grow into a charitable organization that helps thousands of people a year?

When I moved to the Santa Monica Mountains, I started trail riding with life long horsemen and women, and was

introduced to the sport of dressage. Whenever I had to trailer one of my horses to the Alamo Pintado Equine Medical Center in Santa Ynez, I would bribe my daughter, Sophie, to go with me by promising a visit to Quicksilver Miniature Horse Ranch. There we would fantasize about one day having a mini of our own.

That day finally came as my daughter went off to college. I contacted my friends at Quicksilver. They had a petite foal named Quicksilver's Black Pearl and I brought her home at six

months old. A few years later, I added two more minis, Willow Blue and Liberty Belle, and was training all three for equine therapy.

When I started, I knew nothing about equine therapy, had no one to ask, and just put one foot in front of the other. This is what I tell people all the time, especially children: find something you are passionate about and take one baby step at a time. Follow your heart. That's what's most important.

I wanted to honor my father, who was a World War II fighter pilot, and I thought volunteering with the minis at the Veterans Hospital would be the perfect way to do so. It was an uphill battle because Pearl and I were the first equine therapy team at the Los Angeles Veterans Administration Hospital, and they had no idea what to make of us. We had a lot to prove.

Today, Mini Therapy Horses has grown into an incredible charity, helping over 50,000 children and adults a year with highly trained teams of handlers and miniature therapy horses. We are very proud of the work we do helping grieving communities and children and adults in crisis.

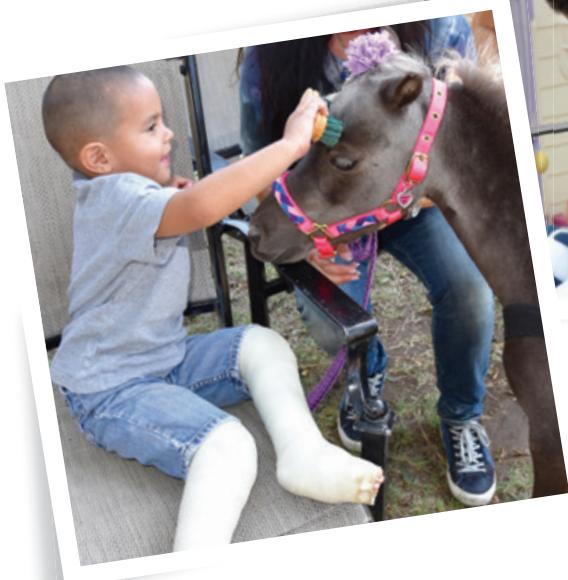
The horses comfort patients and staff in The Greater Los Angeles Veterans Hospital, the psychiatric wards, the Intensive Care Unit, and VA Hospice. We've been visiting weekly for nine years. We love the veterans, and they love our horses!

## STORIES OF INSPIRATION

There are so many heartfelt interactions that have inspired us, including a Last Wish request I once received. A terminal patient, Jerry Amato, requested to see my therapy horse Pearl. He had met Pearl before, and she had touched his heart because, as a child, he had been taken in by a family on a farm, and his fondest memories were of the horses he connected with there. On this visit, Jerry talked to Pearl as he went in and out of consciousness while stroking her. They were communicating in their own language. Pearl knew what he needed. A few days later, Jerry passed peacefully and I felt honored to have Pearl help him along his way.

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**The miniatures are regular visitors at Ronald MacDonald House and local hospitals.**



**They bring smiles and companionship to those they meet and visit with.**

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**Mini Therapy Horses** is affiliated with a number of law enforcement agencies and works with many hospitals. They maintain the highest standards in grooming, hygiene and professionalism, and have a 100% safety record.



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All our tiny mares have a busy schedule. They are registered with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department Civilian Volunteer Program and can be called on at a moment's notice 24/7. We have a special literacy program with Lieutenant Jennifer Seetoo, bringing the minis to schools and LA County Public Libraries.

Mini Therapy Horses are also regular visitors at Ronald McDonald House East Hollywood and Pasadena, where the families of children undergoing treatment for cancer and other critical medical procedures in nearby hospitals get to stay free or at low cost. The children are always excited to spend time with our tiny horses.

We have had so many incredible experiences with the children and their families. Pearl and I visited with a little girl staying at Pasadena Ronald McDonald House who was going through critical procedures and had lost a leg to cancer. We hooked a lead on both sides of Pearl's halter and off we went together, with the girl's walker and all! She was overjoyed and felt so proud to be walking a horse. Being able to lead a horse from a walker or wheelchair gives these kids a sense of empowerment and memories they will never forget.

## Tricks of the trade

Our miniature horses have been trained to do many tricks that help break the ice, promote interaction between patients, and bring joy to people who are withdrawn, depressed or in pain. All the minis can play a keyboard, give a high five, smile, stand on their hind legs, kick balls, squeak toys, and of course, bow!



Another magical visit involved our volunteer Megan Sullivan and myself, our mini therapy horse Willow Blue, and a child who was visually impaired. With sensitivity and compassion, Megan took his hands and helped him navigate Willow from her ears to her hooves. He felt the warm breath from her nostrils and ran his fingers through her fluffy mane. He was ecstatic and his mother was crying; she said she had never seen him respond in such an engaged way. The comfort and relief the mini horses give the parents and siblings of these children is vital to the health of their families. These experiences are the essence of what drives Mini Therapy Horses.

We will be participating in the 2018 Tournament of Roses Parade with our seven magical horses – Black Pearl, Willow Blue, Liberty Belle, American Valor, Blue Moon, Sweet Louise and Stormy Blue. This year's theme is "Making a Difference" – very apt, since making a difference in people's lives is our mission! 🏆

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**Victoria Nodiff-Netanel** has been a horsewoman all her life. From pretending to be a horse as a kid in Wisconsin to painting photorealistic horses at California Institute of the Arts, from toy horses to competing in dressage at the Intermediate level, Victoria has always known the magic of horses. In 2008, Victoria established Mini Therapy Horses, which has grown into an incredible charity. Mini Therapy Horses is available 24/7 with their teams of highly trained mini horses and handlers.