

I believe the people at Horse & Buddy (both four-legged and bipedal) have helped keep my mother young, sharp, happy, healthy, and THRIVING. I dare say they are the primary reason she is doing so well in her golden, twilight years. My mother, Sarah, is living with Alzheimer's.

As a young girl in Henderson, North Carolina, she was a tomboy. Her father gave her a pony at nine, but by twelve she was ready for a horse. Her father half-jokingly said she could have one if she earned enough money. She spent a summer selling greeting cards door-to-door until she could buy Angel, a white Tennessee Walker. From then on she rode Angel bareback all over Vance County — wandering woods and creeks or racing semi-trucks down Highway 1. Truckers yelled her top speed out their windows per their speedometer. When she did finally make it home at dusk in time for supper, her pockets were often carrying a toad, a snake, or some other creature she'd befriend along her way.



At one point she kept more than 21 animals — goats, ducks, rabbits, dogs, cats, doves, parakeets, hamsters, snakes, mice, turtles, and more. Her dream was always to have a farm of her own with horses — a dream she achieved. Unfortunately, all things must come to an end.

Three years ago her husband passed away. He had been bedbound for some time, and her cognitive decline had been progressing for a number of years. She was the brawn and he the brains; together they were whole. They had been living on a 7-acre farm in the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas for almost 20 years. Per her wishes, we kept her on the farm as long as possible with home health visits and caregivers. Within a few months, though, she lost nearly a third of her body weight, suffered a heart attack, then shingles and a stroke. She was declining fast and could no longer maintain her home or the two horses she'd loved for nearly two decades. We made the hard decision to rehome the horses and move her back to her home state.

Momma now lives with my family and me in Raleigh, much to her delight, but every day she ached for her horses. At first our focus was her health. Her dementia specialist reviewed her labs and brain scan and gave us sobering news. In his experience, patients with her level of decline and brain-volume loss often live only a few more years. That was just over two years ago and about the time we found Horse & Buddy's Silver Saddle program.

Horse & Buddy gave her a new lease on life. We were getting medical care for her heart and weight loss, but Horse & Buddy gave her a motivating goal: she needed medical clearance to ride again. The day she got clearance was the happiest I've seen her in years. With therapy, she regained all her weight as muscle and is physically healthier than she has been in a decade. Horse & Buddy offers more than just physical therapy though.



The staff, volunteers, and horses at Horse & Buddy are her closest friends these days. Living with Alzheimer's means that Sarah's world gets smaller and smaller every day. She struggles to be social and participate in conversations. Stories are on repeat, and people often notice she's not at full capacity. People sometimes speak to her like a child and lose interest in engaging with her as an adult. At Horse & Buddy, she's just one of the gals and gets to hang with her best friend, Lucilla, who also lives with dementia. It's one of the few places they are treated as "normal" and can be the center of attention. Moreover, she now has fun stories to share at our social gatherings. Horse & Buddy keeps my mother's world open to the adventures she treasured since childhood — she is again the girl riding bareback in the woods with friends. They motivate her to exercise even when she's tired or her knee hurts. They give her stories to tell and a renewed connection to community.

On top of that, I get respite from caregiving and constant need to help her process the world around her. I also get an hour with my fellow caregiver and close friend, Mark. I know many at Horse & Buddy have their own experiences with dementia and other challenges. We fellowship by sharing experiences most people don't understand or that may be too personal to want to share with others. I bring my three-year-old son, who plays with the horse toys in the gazebo. He watches Granny proudly show her skills and confidence. Everyone is in their element. Everyone is healing or growing in some way. We are thriving.

Sarah recently had an annual checkup with the same doctor who gave the grim prognosis just a few years ago. She scored higher on her memory tests than she has in years. The doctor credits much of this improvement to Horse & Buddy's therapy, and to her connection to family and community. We cannot thank the folks at Horse & Buddy enough for elevating her sense of confidence and well-being each week. They provide an experience above and beyond what she could otherwise afford. We are eternally grateful to all those who make that possible, both the volunteer boots on the ground and the donors who make this possible.

If you are considering a donation to Horse & Buddy, thank you for reading our story. Please give to Horse & Buddy to keep this life-changing program running. Their work would not be possible without supporters like you.

Thank you from us both,

Daniel and Sarah Clay