



Annual Acoustics For Autism Event Benefits Area Youth

Guide To Good Health



Dan Dowling-Bruce (left) and Kathleen Fincher, Serenity Farms volunteer, lead mini horse Thunder during an annual 2K/5K at Owens-Illinois in Perrysburg in 2014. Dan received equine therapy lessons at Serenity Farms, thanks to a scholarship from Project iAm. Acoustics for Autism, on Sunday, March 8 in Maumee, will raise funds for scholarships. PHOTO BY DEE DOWLING

BY KAREN GERHARDINGER | MIRROR REPORTER — Like most teens, Dan Dowling-Bruce likes watching football and basketball games, listening to music and socializing. The 18-year-old Sylvania Southview High School senior now can add equine leader to his resume, thanks to a grant from Project iAm. The nonprofit organization gave Dan a scholarship for six months of horse therapy at Serenity Farm in Luckey, said his mother, Dee Dowling. At first, the 6-foot, 5-inch teenager couldn't find a large enough helmet for his head – or the courage to go near horses. But the therapists at Serenity Farm adapted and customized a therapy program that allows Dan to work with horses without riding them. Dan now grooms and leads the horses out in the field to jump over poles. He also accompanies volunteers in taking mini horses to nursing homes and hospitals. "He loves it. He's showing me pictures on the fridge about horses," Dee said. "But right now it's closed up for winter, as it's too cold." On Sunday, March 8, Dee and Dan will be in Maumee for the Project iAm fundraiser Acoustics for Autism, which features four stages of live music throughout the day. Each year, Project iAm provides scholarships for therapies and supplies not covered by insurance, said founder Nicole Khoury. Dan is one of many Northwest Ohio youths to receive scholarships over the past seven years. "We went to Acoustics for Autism for support, but now I'm a volunteer for life," laughed Dee. Dan was a 1-year-old when he was diagnosed with autism. "We noticed a change. He went from saying words and pointing to things and being aware of surroundings to just shutting down," Dee said. "He would sit there sorting pencils and not make eye contact." At first, Dee thought Dan would grow out of it – he was her first and only child. Instead, she got him into many early interventions. "I believe this is what made him the wonderful man he is today," she said. Dan now attends high school, works with Agility Angels and has speech therapy. Next year he will attend the Self Reliance Center at Toledo Hospital, where he will focus on academics and socialization. Dan uses an iPad to communicate, whether ordering food at a restaurant or sharing thoughts about school with his mom. At Serenity, the specialists also use the iPad to share instructions and guide him in the equine therapy. "Equine-assisted therapy has been instrumental in building Danny's confidence, improving focus, sequencing tasks, increase in social skills, attention to directions and great follow through, just to name a few. Danny is a joy to work with each week," said Serenity executive director and instructor Debra DeHoff. "Danny conducts all of his equine therapy lessons by ground lessons, and is able to use any of the eight horses at the farm with great success." The therapy has been invaluable, and the support from Project iAm overwhelming, Dee said. "When they gave the scholarship to him at Acoustics for Autism last year, I was in tears. Usually if you apply for funding, you go through hoops and applications and income eligibility," Dee said. With Project iAm, parents just need to share a story about why a son or daughter deserves it. Now Dee is busy collecting gift certificates and helping to organize the silent auctions that will take place during the March 8 fundraiser. Donations will go directly to scholarships for area youth with autism, said Project iAm founder Nicole Khoury. The Village Idiot will host music from noon to 2:00 a.m., Buster Brown's Lounge from noon to 11:00 p.m., and the Bier Garden Tent from 4:00 to 10:00 p.m. A silent auction and live music will begin at 1:00 p.m. in the auction tent. Admission is free and all ages are welcome. Raffle winners will be announced at 7:00 p.m. For information, visit www.acousticsforautism.com.

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