

Meredith Hodges Helps Hearts & Horses Acquire Two New Mules By Helen T. Hertz

When Loveland-based therapeutic riding center Hearts & Horses recently retired their only mule Katie, they couldn't wait to get another. For help in their search, they turned to mule aficionado Meredith Hodges, of course.

For years Meredith has contributed generously to Hearts & Horses. She was excited to learn that the non-profit organization had a mule in its program and eager to help them find a replacement. She put the group in touch with top mule broker Lloyd Hawley of Hawleywoods Mule Farm in Prairie Grove, Arkansas.

"Lloyd has a real talent for putting the right mule with the right person," Meredith says. "I knew he could find a good fit."

Sure enough, in September, Lloyd arrived in Loveland with two beauties, seven and ten-year-olds, Brandie and Sadie.

"These are two of my "bomb-proof" mules," Lloyd explains. "They're a good age with the right maturity, experience, training and disposition."

But, Hawley adds, it doesn't matter how good the mule is, if it doesn't work for you.

And he should know. Lloyd has been in the mule business since 1980. He grew up with horses but had his sights set on getting a mule team.

"Right away, I saw the advantage of mules over horses on the trail," he says.

He went to his first mule show in Missouri, and he was hooked.

"We got some show-quality animals, trained them, and we started winning," he says. "Pretty soon, people started to want to buy my mules."

At one time, Lloyd kept as many as 70 to 80 mules on hand. He still keeps 30 or so for sale, along with his brood mares and jennets. Lloyd has supplied mules to other therapeutic riding organizations. It makes perfect sense to him.

"Mules have a little different action (than horses)," he says. "They've got a comfortable ride. The right mule can work real well with special-needs kids."

So far, Brandie and Sadie, look like an ideal match for Hearts & Horses. The center serves about 50 disabled riders each week, and Program Director Jan Pollema agrees that well-trained mules make ideal riding partners.

"They have a smoother gait and can carry more weight, and the kids love them," she says.

Hearts & Horses got its first mule Katie in 2001. She was retired last year after the center named her "Horse" of the Year. Jan says that they use the mules the same way they use their horses. Most riders ride once a week through a variety of programs, and riders are encouraged to participate in as much of the preparation for riding as possible. Games, exercises and steps to reach individual goals yield clear benefits including improved balance, muscle tone and flexibility and improved cognitive ability, confidence and self esteem.

Meredith was on hand to help introduce the mules to their new home. She also gave the center a copy of her correspondence video training series and has offered to help coach staff as they work the two newcomers into the program.

"I could really see this taking off," Meredith says. "And I want to do all I can to help them succeed."