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## A good day at Hinds' Feet

By Ann Fletcher

Unique Huntersville facility serving victims of traumatic brain injury turns one year old.



A typical day is underway at Hinds' Feet Farm in Huntersville. Macy and Shay Day, a pair of thoroughbred mares, are fed, the barn is swept, a stall is mucked. Cloud cover and mud from the previous night's rain doesn't dampen the spirits of those working: They converse, checking off chores on a whiteboard as they go. Despite a slight commotion when Martin the miniature donkey breaks free en route to the farm's front pasture, it's a smooth start at a one-of-a-kind facility on Black Farm Road that is celebrating its first anniversary this week.

Hinds' Feet Farm is one of 18 programs in the country that serves those with brain injury. Executive director Martin Foil, who began raising money for the farm a decade or more ago after his brother, Philip, suffered a catastrophic closed brain injury in a car wreck, calls the farm "a paradigm shift" from the traditional medical model for people with brain injury, a shift that honors an individual's desire and need to live with dignity, respect and high quality of life. The farm's mission is to "maximize the post-injury potential of persons" through integrated, holistic programs.

"We connect our members with a peer group where they are treated with dignity and respect," says Foil.

After Philip endured episodes of verbal and physical abuse at facilities around the country, the family's unshakable belief he'd "have a future and a hope" led Foil's ongoing work and the eventual establishment of Hinds' Feet Farm.

Activities at the farm are person-centered, member-empowered and free-choice, meaning members choose to participate from a variety of cognitive, creative, emotional, physical, recreational, social and vocational programs, both on-site and in the community. The various programs include gardening, woodworking, animal care, yoga, cooking, arts, crafts, writing and community events, Monday through Thursday, from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.; and Friday from 9 a.m. to noon.

"Our members have long-term, personal goals to get better and live independently," says

Foil, "but they also have personal interests, or things they like to do, and our staff helps guide them through activities they choose. Members take ownership and pride in the program because it's theirs. This is truly a democratic process."

Among the most important aspects of the program are the opportunities to "work" on the farm. Hinds' Feet's members help tend to animals to the extent that they can, a significant role change from their daily routine.

"Our members are not dependent," says Foil, "They are being depended upon."

Design and fundraising are under way for Hinds' Feet Farm to open a six-bed, long-term family care home on-site. Additionally, there are plans to offer the program elsewhere in the state.

"Ideally, we'd like to be within an hour's drive of anyone in North Carolina," says Foil. "We'd need about six facilities to do that, but the programs don't need to be at farms. A community college, for example, would make a wonderful spot for our program."

Will DeGrauw, a certified rehabilitation counselor, case manager and brain injury specialist from New Hampshire, moved to Huntersville's NorthStone community with his wife to become the farm's day program director. With 20 years in community-based brain injury rehabilitation, DeGrauw feels a deep connection to those with brain injury and their families, who provide a vital circle of support.

A family/caregiver support group offers "a safe place to vent questions, concerns, fears, frustrations," facilitated by a staff member who relies "on the help and collaboration of families' experiences, stories and wisdom."

The day program has 10 members but DeGrauw would like to expand to 16 who meet the farm's criteria, as outlined on the facilities Web site at [www.Hinds'feetfarm.org](http://www.Hinds'feetfarm.org).

The beauty of the program is evident throughout the farm and its members: stone buildings and brick walkways lead to a millstone fountain adjacent to "The Ark," or multi-purpose building where members meet daily after animal care.

A member who suffered brain injury at age 16 from a drive-by shooting introduces himself as Ron and leads the day's community meeting, reviewing the schedule and "common sense guidelines," that include "learn from teachable moments, enjoy friendships, watch how you convey messages, the speed and volume of your voice, live by the Golden Rule ..."

Ron leads a discussion of personal goals, saying: "I'd like to go back to work." Another member, Kate, would like to "move out of the house and live on my own," and another, Eric, would like to "make sure each day goes well."

The group reads and discusses an e-mail from a member on vacation.

Ron asks for words of wisdom before offering his own: "Keep God in your life and you'll be alright."

Each member pulls out a notebook to record upcoming events. They discuss personal responsibility during the Davey Allison Memorial Golf Classic, where they'll sell baked goods and talk about the bluebird houses they've made. Proceeds from the sale support community outings, like Knights baseball games.

Ron's humor shines through as the group plans. They share a laugh.

"Ron, I'd like to compliment you on your sense of humor," says program director DeGrauw.

"That's who I was before the shooting," says Ron. "Then, I got real serious, and that was part of my injury. But I'm trying to live again, to be who I was."

It's another positive step at Hinds' Feet Farm, where more than 13 Eagle Scout projects enhance the farm's amenities. Members, families and staff make the place meaningful.

Outside, DeGrauw admires Puddin' the miniature horse as she's set out to pasture. Instinctively, she embraces her freedom, galloping full speed, gliding through grass, spirit soaring.

"She's a testament to our program," says DeGrauw. "She runs like lightening; so free, so happy. That's what we do here. We give freedom back to people living with brain injury."

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