

Reaching Beyond Boundaries: Isla



Isla, pictured with her parents, Chris and Molly, has been a physical therapy patient at NCEFT for two years.



It wasn't long ago that Isla had never before seen a horse, let alone ridden one. Isla is only five, after all. But today, Isla's relationship with a horse named Cody is making a big difference in her quest to reach beyond the boundaries nature set for her.

Isla was born four weeks premature. She was small, weighing in at only three pounds, fifteen ounces. A very tiny little girl, indeed. Fortunately, she was also healthy and remained in the neonatal intensive care unit for only three weeks.

Once home, though, parents Molly and Chris noticed that Isla was not meeting all of her developmental milestones. After a visit to a neurologist and a brain MRI, Molly and Chris learned that Isla had underdeveloped white matter in her brain, a condition that led to her diagnosis of ataxic cerebral palsy and global developmental delays.



Isla was born prematurely.

Isla's is a rare condition, so Molly and Chris proceeded to find resources for Isla without much data to help them understand what to expect in terms of her future capabilities. Instead, they chose then (and still do) to focus on whether Isla is happy and making progress. Molly, who grew up in Palo Alto, had a friend who was a long-time volunteer at NCEFT. "I remember him telling me stories about incredible, miraculous changes in children with whom he worked. He saw them learn to talk and learn to walk." She and Chris decided to look into therapy at NCEFT for Isla.

At Isla's assessment for treatment, both parents were nervous when it came time to put Isla on the horse. Isla doesn't always cope well with new people or new situations, and as her father says with a grin, "I was skeptical of the whole thing. She doesn't even like it when we put her on a swing." But as Molly recounts, "She was fussy walking out from the clinic to the riding arena, but when they put her on Cody, just instantly there was this Zen, this calm that came over her. I could tell she was completely comfortable. She was content and happy. I was amazed."



Isla and Cody make a great team.

And every week since for the past two years, Isla has looked forward to her time with Cody and Chris Swan, NCEFT's program director and physical therapist. Although Isla is nonverbal, she clearly communicates her enthusiasm for physical therapy at NCEFT. On Thursdays, when she's due to come to NCEFT, her parents observe that Isla is happy all day. She is picked up early from school and knows exactly where she is going—smiling in anticipation and eagerly looking out the car window. By the time they arrive, Molly says, Isla is practically glowing. And the happiness carries over, often for several days at a time. The equine-assisted therapy seems to have a calming, grounding effect on Isla.



Isla loves storybooks. Reading them is a great motivator, and reaching to turn the pages is great exercise. Once Isla gains more head and trunk control, she will be better able to control her head position while wearing a helmet. For now, she does not wear one.

Isla has a visual processing issue that causes her to tilt her head to the right, so Chris Swan focuses Isla's work on developing head and trunk control. Chris notes that Cody gives Isla just the right amount of movement to provide a challenge, but is comfortable enough for Isla to enjoy engaging in the sessions. "Because of Cody's movement," Chris says, "Isla has been able to start to lift her arms off of him and not have to use them while he's walking, which is just amazing. The first time she did that by herself, we didn't even have to ask for it. She just sat up."



Isla has a number of different therapies, so her parents interact with a lot of therapists, all of whom have mentioned how important core strength is and how good horse therapy is for developing that.

Her father, Chris, relates that, "Her occupational therapist has told me specifically that the motion on the horse is really good because it is in different directions and Isla has to adjust to that. She says that is important for everything else: for sitting up, standing, walking, and even for speech. The therapy Isla is doing at NCEFT is invaluable. It's something she wouldn't be able to get anywhere else. She has a lot of other therapies but this is unique. It compliments all the other work we are doing."



Isla and Chris Swan, NCEFT Program Director and Physical Therapist, work on gait training during a therapy session.



Isla's hard work and determination show in her ever-expanding list of capabilities. Today, in addition to the advances she's made while riding Cody, she is also standing for longer and longer periods while holding on to something, sitting at a bench independently, kneeling, pulling up to stand—all precursors to independent walking. Not only that, her relationship with Cody helps in other ways. As her father notes, "She's this little tiny girl who gets on this giant horse every week. She reaches out to try to pull herself up onto Cody. I think the therapy has inspired confidence in her."



Multidimensional equine movement is a valuable therapy tool. Throughout sessions, therapists place patients in different positions to take the best advantage of the movement.

Molly says of Isla's time at NCEFT, "It has been such a wonderful experience. Not only for her and how much she enjoys it and all the benefits she gets from it in terms of her development and the progress she's making, but it's also a wonderful place. I always feel so welcomed when I come here. The staff are remarkable, and so are the volunteers. Everyone is so friendly and so nice and supportive. It really does feel like this community of people who care. We feel really grateful that we're connected with this organization."