

On behalf of the Nature's Edge Therapy Center, I would like to share the impact the animals, therapists, and volunteers have had on our family.

Our twins, TJ and Sam, were born at 29 weeks due to complications from Twin to Twin Transfusion Syndrome in October of 2001. To make a very long story somewhat short, TJ was diagnosed with cerebral palsy when he was 15 months old. He received PT, OT, and speech services through the Birth-to-three program and then through the Eau Claire School Systems preschool program and Sacred Heart Hospital. In conjunction with his regular therapy I have always looked for "fun" therapy for him to do such as swim therapy and this past summer Hippotherapy. Hippotherapy was something that I had read about and it had also been suggested to me by a few other parents of children with cerebral palsy and our physiatrist. Last spring I decided to try to find a center near our home and found the Nature's Edge Web site.

TJ had his first evaluation last May and at that time his verbal skills were minimal at best. Once in awhile we would hear a "Mama" or "Dada." His first time on the horse, he was bent over at the waist and could not sit up straight. He also needed much prompting to tell the horse to "go" by either pointing to pictures or trying to say a "g" sound. By the end of the summer, TJ would sit up tall on Scout and needed no prompting to say "go, Scout." In June, Becky also loaned us an augmentative device called a Dynamite. This device has a screen with multiple squares on each page and when one is pushed the device "talks." We programmed many pages for TJ so he could tell us about what he had done so far in the summer, what movie or book he wanted, or what he wanted to say to his brothers. He loved the device and I think that it opened the door for him to want to communicate. His face would light up when someone would ask him a question, he could find the right button and tell them the answer. It was very fun to watch his progress. By August, he was saying so many words on his own that he did not want to even work with the device anymore.

As I look back at the progress that TJ made over the summer, I am not sure what made the most impact but I know that he made more progress in those 3 months than we have seen in a long time. Was his improvement due to his core trunk muscles being strengthened by riding a horse which is necessary for vocal output? Did the Dynamite open that one door that had been preventing him from trying to communicate with us? Did having one more day of therapy per week (he also had PT two times a week at our local hospital) really pay off and help strengthen his weak muscles? He had phenol injections in May which was also a new therapy for him. Did this break down his spasticity enough so he could make these new gains? I am not sure, but I do know that we will be back at Nature's Edge next summer. Becky, Nancy, and all of the volunteers were so positive and encouraging to us all. They went the extra mile to ensure that we had the best therapy experience for TJ. I wish that this therapy center was closer to our home so we could use it year round!

Beth Ivankovic