

City of Edmonton Community Investment Operating Grant



Little Bits Therapeutic Associations - Impact to Recipients Living with Disabilities

Rachel - Catherine and Dirk Kelm

Riding since 2007, Autism

As she has gotten older, she has pulled back from all social and educational learning programs, except one – Little Bits.

When Rachel first started riding at age 7, we used to use riding as an incentive for her to have good days in school or she wouldn't be able to go riding. We soon learned that it is on her bad days that she NEEDS the riding the most. It is still amazing that, no matter what mood she is in on her riding day, she comes off her horse feeling more stable emotionally and more comfortable in her world. That is huge for her and us!

Our daughter has also developed *special relationships* with each horse she has ridden and the staff and the volunteers of Little Bits over the years.



Benefits:

- increasing **muscle tone** and strength
- having a *mental workout* as she controls her horse through the lesson
- improving **core strength** and **posture** (our daughter has mild scoliosis)
- boosting **mood** and **reducing stress**
- improving **coordination**
- being out in fresh air and **nature** as the seasons allow
- doing **cardio exercise**, especially during trotting
- *socializing* with the **volunteers**, fellow **riders** and her **horse**
- improving circulation and flexibility
- developing more horse riding skills and *confidence*

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ZiHeng – Ying Yi & Kevin Campbell

Riding since 2016, multiple physical & medical disabilities

Little Bits is a part of our family's *community*, a rare place of *meaningful social inclusion* for our son born with complex medical disabilities, right in our beloved city – Edmonton.

This is his *safe heaven*, a place where the many volunteers and staff welcome him and the family with *open heart*. Little Bits believes in ZiHeng's *potentials*, and respects his desires to learn at his own pace.

Our protective hearts were grateful when ZiHeng had 3 volunteers guarding and guiding him in his first year, and equally in disbelief to see him riding independently with such *confident* today!



ZiHeng started riding with Little Bits at 10, but the journey to get on a horse took 4 years because of the severe anxiety associated with unpredictability.

Inspired by the magical powers of knights and horses, our young son was *Determined* to build on his *Courage* to overcome the obstacles so that he can be a *hero* to himself.

And these heroic powers continue to propel him towards *building life skills* and *managing difficult experiences* to becoming an *Independent* person in this very challenging world.

In our humble opinions, Little Bits and the Whitemud Equine Center is the combination of *world class jewel* for the city of Edmonton – It is the face of an *Social Inclusive city* which Edmonton prides itself of.

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Tina – 63 years old

Riding since 2017 Multiple Sclerosis

I have always loved horses. In my younger years I rode a great deal, even learning to jump horses. Sadly, that all came to an end with an MS diagnosis and two young children to raise. I was resigned to the idea that I would probably never get on a horse again.

Then one day, with my kids grown up and my disability worsening, I came across the Little Bits website and thought “this could work for me”.

I met Linda, Joanne, Catherine, Marielle and Ros and began to learn and appreciate what Little Bits is all about. It’s a dedicated team of women that love horses and feel they can bring out the best in people both physically and emotionally. It’s also a wonderful collection of hardworking volunteers that freely give their time and encouragement to their riders and their horses.

Now that we have a beautiful new arena and barn there are several options for helping a rider to mount. I mount my horse from the mezzanine which gets me up higher because I need help to get my leg over my horse’s back. There are several different kinds of saddles that can be used. I use a blanket with a girth, stirrups and a handle. There are leaders and side walkers if necessary to ensure safety and security. Normally I don’t need a side walker but since I broke my femur last year, I have one (just to be safe) until I build up my strength and confidence again.

When I ride I stretch out my tight leg muscles. Sitting up tall builds core strength and balance. The gentle rocking motion of the horse as it walks helps with my troublesome sacrum and SI joints. All good benefits for doing something I enjoy. MS has compromised my ability to ride but not my joy of being on the back of a horse again.



For me, there is nothing better than riding down Keillor Road on a beautiful fall day enjoying the sunshine, the leaves and the river. Something I would never be able to do on foot. In the arena we put our horses through their paces, at a walk and occasionally a trot. It is truly a confidence builder when you can get a thousand-pound animal to do what you want it to do.

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This program has been so **vital** for my son who has autism and a severe speech impediment over the last 11 years. It enables him to participate in a sport that builds his **confidence**, **competence** and **self esteem** while also gaining the **respect** of his neurotypical peers.

Many other sports offered to his peers involve teamwork - a concept that is extremely difficult for a child with autism. Little Bits offers him his **own sport** where he doesn't feel left out or incapable.

The **CIOG** makes it **affordable** to keep my son riding in Little Bits by subsidizing the cost of what otherwise would be just too expensive for the average family. Beyond the **sheer joy** he gets from riding, he is also learning important **skills** such as respect for another creature, the subtleties of working with an animal, **caring** for something **other** than yourself, **spatial awareness**, turn taking, listening skills and **independence**.

Again, I am asking you to continue to support this amazing and **invaluable** program for our disabled community. This is a **unique** opportunity that many people with disabilities would normally not get an opportunity to try.

The staff and volunteers work so hard to keep the program going and I know that many people, my son for one, would be **broken-hearted** if it were not able to continue due to lack of funding.

Shannon

Riding for many years

Shannon has been riding with Little bits Therapeutic Riding Association for many years. Shannon celebrates riding horses as an accomplishment in her life. She has gone through much turmoil in her life having been born with Downs and having a hearing impairment. The riding of the horses has given her *independence, freedom*, and some *control* of her situation. Riding has been therapeutic in that she has bonded with horses and identifies with the animals as a kindred spirit. They are gentle animals that welcomed her and made her feel happy to be around.

Having a *supportive environment* such as the one that Little Bits affords has been a godsend. Shannon lost her dad last year. The comfort from the animals and the consistency that Shannon knew she could look forward to slipping on her special boots and go for a ride was a *healing* aspect to her.

The *joy* in her face when she knows she is going riding is evident in her smile, the way her eyes light up, and the energy she gets ready with. Due to the hearing impairment, she is given an extra side walker, this helps her to be *independent* and still have the right amount of support.

Shannon has progressed to riding without a lead now, this is a monumental moment in her life. To be able to control the horse on her own while walking is very *empowering*, she doesn't get that feeling from her daily life in the same way due to her limited abilities to carry out tasks. Shannon's *life quality* has been improved by the addition of this program and it shows each time she rides or talks about her experience with the horses. She has ridden a variety of horses through the program and has had a few different instructors. Lisa stands out amongst them. She has been with Shannon for 9 years and seems to appreciate Shannon's unique diversity amongst her peers. Lisa has approached Shannon's capabilities with honor, respect, and a challenge to be her best.

The family appreciates what an *educational opportunity* this has been and continues to be for our girl. We help to fundraise for the program which also allows us to give back to the community. We welcome additional opportunities to support this program.



At that time, he was completely nonverbal and presented with severe anxiety and adhd and severe behaviour challenges including hitting, kicking, biting and screaming.

significant improvement in all areas of behaviour challenges while on the horse, a decrease in his anxiety level and an increase in his confidence and ability to communicate since he started the program.

We feel that it is imperative and vital that funding is continued for this program because of the benefits it gives to the children as well as their families and to the larger community.

Little Bits to be a well-run, compassionate and professional organization. The instructors are excellent and the volunteers are amazing. All the staff are friendly and the classes and facility are well run. They really do an amazing job at giving kids of all abilities the chance to ride a horse, gain skills and confidence and most of all to have fun.

We feel it is important that no child is left behind because of the unique challenges they face in the wider community they live in because of the trickle-down effect it has on society. It is my plea that no child should be left behind because of their disabilities and my hope that they can live and be part of the wider society because that is what they deserve. If funding is cut, it will have a trickle-down effect on the children, their families and wider community that will need to find other supports to support their the child.

Overall Little Bits has been a great benefit to our son Ryan. He has learned riding skills as well as social skills and had a lot of fun over his four years riding. We feel Little Bits is a valuable and beneficial program to our son as well as all the riders, volunteers and staff.

Maddie – Leslie Papas

Riding since 2021 Rare genetic syndrome “Basilicata-Akhtar syndrome”, Autism

Our daughter Maddie has a rare genetic syndrome called Basilicata-Akhtar syndrome. This syndrome affects her in many ways, but a few key areas are a global developmental delay and muscle/tone issues. We try our best to keep Maddie active and her body moving as this helps build muscle and flexibility. By keeping her active, we are decreasing the risk of her losing mobility as she grows. Maddie is autistic as well and this makes settings with lots of sensory issues challenging.

As you can imagine, if your child struggles with coordination and sensory sensitivity, it can be hard to find activities that are fun, engaging and accommodating. I heard about Little Bits from a family friend who attended therapeutic horse back riding through the organization when she was little.

We were lucky to start our journey with Little Bits in December 2021 after 2 years of being on the waitlist. I remember telling Linda at Little Bits before Maddie’s start date of her challenges and saying, “she’ll need a smaller horse due to her legs not having much flexibility”. She was so understanding and encouraging. It was the first time I felt like our family belonged and was in the right place.

In the beginning, Maddie was very nervous and uncomfortable. She feared all the unpredictable noises the horses make and the many faces of the volunteers. I had to walk beside Maddie for a few weeks before she became comfortable in the setting. Jo, her instructor, and the volunteers won Maddie over with their great welcoming smiles and charismatic charm.

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Maddie – Leslie Papas

Riding since 2021 Rare genetic syndrome “Basilicata-Akhtar syndrome”, Autism

Maddie has grown so much since starting therapeutic horse back riding. In the months since starting, she now walks in ready to ride! She’s able to lift her leg over the horse to get her feet in the stirrups (even on a bigger horse!). She’s been taught to use the reins and can coordinate both hands independently to lead the horse where she needs to go. She can communicate with the horses using the commands learned and isn’t shy to engage with her volunteer helpers and instructor. Maddie has the perfect posture on the horse and loves trotting! Her flexibility increased significantly, and her core muscles are stronger.

These skills have transferred to so many areas in her day-to-day life. Maddie can now jump on a trampoline without falling or injuring herself. She’s made many friendships and has developed a love and respect for horses and other animals. Her hand coordination has improved and is noticeable at school when doing fine motor skill tasks. There is a significant increase in confidence and her communication skills with others.

We are so grateful for Little Bits, their donors and grants that contribute to this wonderful program. It’s made a huge impact on Maddie’s life so far and we can’t wait to see how much further she goes!

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Alíyyah

Riding for 15+ years

My name is Aliyyah and I have been a part of the Little Bits Therapeutic Program for 15 years and I have never missed a lesson.

This program is very special to me because it is therapeutic and is a fun activity for me. I find that it helps my anxiety by being in a calm soothing environment surrounded by animals and nature. Seeing the horses makes me feel serene and happy. Little Bits helps me grow my independence by learning to ride independently and give instructions to the horses. After riding the horses, we get to spend time grooming and feeding them, which is one of my favorite things.

The horse I am currently riding is Popeye and his coat is soft as a bunny. I find it very soothing to pet him. I find it comforting to ride horses and learn new skills each time I go. It's a time to be social and get out of my comfort zone. Sometimes we go on trail rides outside by the river, which is an amazing way to experience nature, I love being out in the fresh air and interacting with my community.

The Little Bits program has made me more confident. **It means so much to me and I don't know what I would do without it.** At horse riding I gain more knowledge about horses such as the parts of the horse, how to take the bridle off and so much more. My instructor has taught me that when you are nervous the horse can feel it. This helps me stay calm as I don't want to scare the horse. The program has encouraged me to research more about horses and has inspired me to create a blog about them. In conclusion, it's my favorite place to go to where I can enjoy horses and have fun.



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Danita

Riding for many years

Danita has so enjoyed her spring and fall riding lessons with Little Bits Therapeutic Riding Association for many years now. It is so important to her both physically and mentally. She so enjoys the connection with the horses now as well. The staff and volunteers are unbelievably kind so always hugs when Danita arrives. We don't get to see her ride as often now as we would like but definitely have noticed she can control herself better each year. This program is so beneficial for people with disabilities.

Betty (Danita's Mom)



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