Five Star Outlook
FOR THE EISENHOWER MEDICAL CENTER TEAM

EISENHOWER MEDICAL CENTER
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David Perez — Volunteer for Autistic Children and Healing Horses

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Eight months ago, David Perez, Vice President and Chief Information Officer for Eisenhower Medical Center discovered a challenging, inspirational and physically demanding way to spend his Saturdays. As a volunteer for Healing Horses Therapeutic Riding Center, Perez stepped into unfamiliar territory that subsequently changed his life.

David Perez, Vice President and Chief Information Officer, leads Tristan Lawrence and his horse during Tristan's session at Healing Horses Therapeutic Riding Center.

Every Saturday morning, Perez drives the dusty, dirt roads leading to the Empire Polo Club in Indio, arriving at 7:30 a.m. for six hours of working with autistic children and horses.

"All week long, I look forward to it," says Perez. "I do everything from walking with a horse and a child, to cleaning stalls, scrubbing 50-gallon water barrels, and driving a tractor or carrying hay bales. It is a completely different world for me and I really enjoy it."

Established in April 2008, Healing Horses embraces a multi-faceted therapeutic approach to working with autistic children. Therapeutic riding was introduced in Scandinavia in 1946 before eventually finding its way to the United States in 1960.

"As a parent of three healthy children, I never had issues with them, other than the normal things that come up," says Perez. "Volunteering with Healing Horses has opened my eyes. Autistic children and their families face enormous difficulties."

According to Perez, some of the children who participate in the Healing Horses programs are agitated and reluctant to participate when they arrive. Something as seemingly innocuous as a cloudy day can create anxiety in an autistic child. But once the children are on the horses, their transformation to a state of calmness is remarkable.

Depending on the severity of a child's autism, up to three volunteers may work with each child — a handler to lead the horse and one volunteer on each side of the horse. Periodically, the horses are stopped so a child may practice balance and strengthening exercises while still on the horse. The children may also practice identifying numbers or colors while in the riding ring.

"The parents are extremely appreciative of having a place to bring their children where they can see changes that occur in their child," says Perez. "It also provides a one-hour respite for the parents."

In the United States, autism now affects one in 150 children and is four times more common in boys than girls. Typically appearing during the first three years of life, autism is the result of a neurological disorder that affects the normal functioning of the brain, impacting development in the areas of social interaction and communication skills.

Due to high demand, Healing Horses has a waiting list of children whose parents would like them to participate. Parents pay a nominal fee for each class with the balance covered through donations and fundraising efforts. There is always a need for more volunteers.

"When you're working with a child, you are completely focused on that child," says Perez. "I've learned just how brilliant some of these children are. They may hardly speak and their faces may be blank, but their brains are extraordinarily active and alive. I'm thankful to be able to see them in a different light."