



Gaston nature preserve opens doors to fundraiser for Shriners Hospitals for Children

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By Bernie Petit

Picture a movie scene – an old Western, perhaps – where a majestic horse trots gracefully alongside the riverbank of an undisturbed natural sanctuary.

It's a sight you can see this weekend, as the Gaston County Horseman's Association hosts a Benefit Ride for Shriners Hospitals for Children at Redlair Farm & Forest in the eastern part of the county.

Riders of all levels are welcome to bring their steeds to the fundraiser and pay what they can to traverse the trails of the pristine swath of land, which includes several acres that front the South Fork River.

Even if you don't have a horse, the event is still a great excuse to check out the 750-acre private nature preserve protected by the Catawba Lands Conservancy and typically closed to the public.

"It'll be a good day to get out and get out into nature," said Helen Rankin, a longtime horseman's association member.

Rankin is no relation to Haywood Rankin, whose family has owned the land for generations. But she's known the family and their refuge for years. She lives down the road and "I've rode here all my life."

Association members and their horses are occasionally allowed to travel through Redlair and will serve as guides for one, two and three hour trail rides.

There will be trail bosses throughout the preserve to keep riders who want to give the trails a go on their own from getting lost or going down narrower tracks intended for hikers.

Participants are encouraged to work up an appetite – there will be plenty of hot dogs and hamburgers fresh off the grill for sale around noon, along with homemade sweets and drinks.

The event is personal for Rankin – her granddaughter, Katlyn Marcengill, underwent surgery at The Shriners Hospital for Children in Greenville, S.C., in 2007 to straighten her legs, curved because of her cerebral palsy.

"She swims and she walks real good in the water," the proud grandma remarked. Otherwise, Katlyn, 9, either uses a walker for short periods or a wheelchair.

Her legs are starting to bend back again because of a growth spurt and doctors have said she'll need another operation in the next year or two. The specially made braces for her legs have to be replaced every several months, which means she still makes regular trips from Gaston County with her parents to the regional Shriners facility.

It's why Rankin suggested the horse club organize this first-time benefit. Ever penny, from food sales to whatever folks who come out decide to donate, will go to help Shriners Hospitals for Children, which provides specialty pediatric care for children.

"They do so much good work," she said. "They don't charge a dime for anything and they're real accommodating. If you don't have a ride to get your child to the hospital, they'll take you.

"They've done so much for my granddaughter and I'd like to do something back to try to help them."

Ride Redlair

The Gaston County Horseman's Association (GCHA) will host a Benefit Ride for Shriners Hospitals Saturday at Redlair Farm & Forest, 2271 Rankin Road, Gastonia. Guided one, two and three hour rides will start at 10 a.m. Riders should bring their own horses. Trails will be marked and trail bosses will be placed throughout the preserve to help riders who want to ride on their own. Hot dogs, hamburgers, snacks, homemade sweets and drinks will be available for purchase.

The GCHA asks participants to donate what they can – all proceeds will go to the Shriners Hospitals for Children. For those who can't attend but want to help, donations can be sent to Gaston County Horseman's Association, P.O. Box 3784, Gastonia, N.C., 28053.

For more information, call Debra Porter at 704-517-9688, Linda Farris at 803-684-5465 or Helen Rankin at 704-827-8358. For more on the GCHA, visit the club's website at www.gastoncountyhorsemans.org.

Getting to Redlair

From Interstate 85, take exit 23 toward Lowell/McAdenville and turn left on Hickory Grove Road. Drive approximately 3.3 miles to Rankin Road and turn left. The paved road becomes a gravel road after a mile or so; the field is on the left. There will be directional signs on Hickory Grove and Rankin roads. Parking signs and attendants will be on site.

<http://www.gastongazette.com/articles/scene-49155-movie-children.html>