

# ST. CROIX TRAIL BLAZERS

## NEWSLETTER

ISSUE 19 | JUNE 2020

### A Veteran's Perspective—Alex S.

I served in the United States Marine Corps from 2005-2009 as a Motor Transport Operator. I served two tours in Iraq, one in 2007 during the pinnacle of the troop surge and another lapsing between mid-2008 through early-2009. After the Marine Corps, I attended the University of Minnesota to earn my undergraduate degree. Go Gophers!

I have been riding with the St. Croix Trail Blazers for about 6 months, since late 2019. I generally ride Diezel or Rowdy and have ridden Willow and Kelly. My favorite horse to ride so far has been Diezel because we seem to get along well. The best parts of riding are the feelings of interconnectedness with the horses which helps me in managing my anxiety and to work better with each horse. I also really like that every horse is different and you have to adjust your expectations. The therapy aspect of being around a horse is astounding.

I have been married for three years to a wonderful woman named Lilly and we have a 9-month-old son named Emmett,



who we hope to get on a pony ride in the near future. We have a rescue dog named Deena and a rescue cat named Hazel. In my spare time, I volunteer at Sundown Horse Rescue in Hugo, MN. Helping care for rescued horses is an absolute pleasure and I consider it church in a way that is healing to my spirit.

Outside of riding, I enjoy cooking and recently started gardening native perennial flowers and hope to work my way up to a vegetable garden that would make my grandfather proud. I enjoy outdoor activities like hiking, mountain biking, and canoe camping in the Boundary Waters. I play adult hockey for the Minnesota Warriors, which is a non-profit hockey program for disabled veterans. I am very grateful for the opportunity to ride horses. When I was a kid my alter ego was Cowboy Alex. I was able to do some trail riding, but never was able to gain the skills to be a proficient rider. St. Croix Trail Blazers allows me the opportunity to enhance my mental health and become a more proficient rider.

### MISSION

St. Croix Trail Blazers' missions are to provide horseback riding, training, and competitive sports opportunities to individuals with special needs in a safe, learning environment through the adaptive equine experience and provide therapeutic riding and activities for active duty or veteran military personnel to enhance their physical, emotional, and social well-being.

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## Grant

The COVID-19 pandemic has been hard on many individuals and businesses. I hope we are finally seeing a better side of this situation. Many thoughts and ideas were put together in terms of what we could do immediately and in the future if this went on for months on end. Being at the barn with the horses on occasion was still a happy place for me but just didn't seem the same without all the smiling faces and excited riders each week. Thankfully, we were able to get "back in the saddle" again June 1st!

During this time Manitou Fund, formerly the Lee & Rose Warner Foundation, accepted our grant application relating to the pandemic. The foundation was established in 1959 when Don McNeely honored his aunt and uncle by creating the Lee & Rose Warner Foundation.

Some of the notable contributions of Mr. McNeely in this area are the Lee and Rose Warner Coliseum at the Minnesota State Fairgrounds, the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory at Como Park, and the Lee and Rose Warner Nature Center. The Manitou Fund graciously awarded us a \$10,000 grant which allowed us to move forward with our hay purchase, ensure veterinary needs were met, and feed supplies were well stocked. We are very appreciative of the generosity of the Manitou Fund which made this time a little easier. Thanks also goes to Stu Grubb for making this introduction and assisting in the process.

If you would like more information on the Manitou Fund, visit their website at [www.welovewarner.org](http://www.welovewarner.org).

## Riders in the Spotlight: Gabe, Evan, and Issac



SCTB: How long have you been riding with St. Croix Trail Blazers?

Gabe, Evan, Isaac: 3 years.

SCTB: What horse(s) do you ride?

Gabe: Billy and other horses that are working.

Evan: Jag and other horses that are working.

Issac: Rowdy and other horses that are working.

SCTB: Do you have a favorite horse?

Gabe: Diesel because he turns well and he listens.

Evan: Jag.

Issac: Rowdy.

SCTB: What is your favorite thing about riding?

Gabe: I like being with the horses.

Evan: Jag.

Issac: Rowdy.

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SCTB: Do you have any hobbies?

Gabe: I play Dungeons and Dragons; also like to play guitar, bass, piano, and trumpet.

Evan: I play the baritone and do karate.

Issac: I play VR (virtual reality) and like to swing and jump on our trampoline.

SCTB: Do you play other sports?

Gabe: I do gymnastics and karate.

Evan: I do gymnastics and karate.

Issac: I don't play sports, but I like to craft with cardboard and hot glue.

## St. Croix Trail Blazers Saddle Up to Help Those with Special Needs

Founded in 2010, the St. Croix Trail Blazers is a unique organization with a group of riders who share a love of horses and a commitment to overcoming challenges. Settled on 29 sprawling acres in Stillwater, Minn., this non-profit's mission is to provide horse assisted learning, riding, training and competitive sports opportunities to individuals with special needs in a safe, inclusive and nonjudgmental community.

"It was children that inspired the idea," says executive director, Karen Harjes, one of the organization's founding members.

"As a parent of a child with special needs, my son, Austin, made me step out of my comfort zone and into the horse world. Since the age of 8, Austin had been involved with a hippotherapy program (the use of horseback riding as a therapeutic or rehabilitative treatment that improves coordination, balance and strength.) ... Seeing what horseback riding has done for him, is so worth the time I volunteer as executive director." Austin, now 23, is still involved with the program and the horses.

The staff includes program director, Kellie Grayden and four instructors. Grayden oversees the care of the horses, facility

maintenance, coordinates volunteers and riders, and continually works with instructors. She is also becoming PATH certified with the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship. There are also 28 volunteers who help in various ways by, "doing chores around the facility, helping with the horses, or being an extra set of eyes during lessons."



Equine therapy helps riders through life's journey.

Photo by: Tate Carlson

The St. Croix Valley Trail Blazers focuses its programs on safety and working with the riders' ability and comfort level through an adaptive equine experience. Whether the disability is physical, cognitive, emotional or behavioral – the organization's website describes

that horseback riding improves balance and coordination which results in increased mobility, independence and overall function.

There are currently 59 participating riders that vary in age and ability. From the age of 8 and older, from beginners to those cantering, programs provide riders with the opportunity to create friendships in a fun atmosphere, empower, support and strengthen the rider, and nurture a bond between horse and rider.

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"Often times, family members of some of our riders share that coming to the facility and working with the horses is their 'happy place.'"



Austin, age 25, rides Willow as program director Kellie Grayden provides instructions.

When a new rider starts riding you can see their posture change, and their confidence grow. The smiles and happiness that being with the horses brings them is

wonderful to watch. There is a lot happening during a lesson that challenges our riders; listening to the instructor, watching for other riders and horses, keeping heels down, weaving cones, and recognizing their distance of others," Harjes says.

Every August, the Trail Blazers take riders to the Special Olympics. The past two years, teams of 24 and 25 riders attended. Riders compete in events based on the class level in which they are registered. According to Harjes, "The Special Olympics is a chance for riders to display their showmanship skills, working trail, equitation, barrels, and pole weaving. While going to the competition is

completely voluntary, it's a wonderful opportunity to see the riders supporting one another, and practice wonderful examples of good sportsmanship."

In November of 2019, the Trail Blazers implemented a veteran's program. Modeled after the program for special needs riders, it is designed for a more individualized experience that allows veterans to determine the type of



Evelyn, age 8, enjoys time with Casper.

direction and focus of their program. There are currently two veterans participating, with the goal of future expansion of that program. Harjes says, "One veteran rider described

working with the horses, 'is like going to church.'" The St. Croix Trail Blazers still has openings for riders. To learn more visit [stcroixtrailblazers.org](http://stcroixtrailblazers.org).

Reprinted, with permission, from the April/May 2020 issue of the St. Croix Valley Magazine.

*Article by: Nealy Corcoran*

## Make-Up Reminder



If St. Croix Trail Blazers cancels your lesson, you will have a make-up lesson. **You have 30 days to schedule that lesson with Kellie.** Please do so by email so there is a written record: [kellie@stcroixtrailblazers.org](mailto:kellie@stcroixtrailblazers.org).

Thanks!



## Our Email Addresses

You can reach these people at their email addresses:

Karen: [karen@stcroixtrailblazers.org](mailto:karen@stcroixtrailblazers.org)

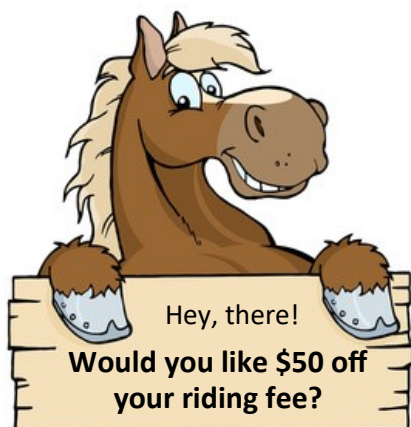
Kellie: [kellie@stcroixtrailblazers.org](mailto:kellie@stcroixtrailblazers.org)

Brette (treasurer):

[brette@stcroixtrailblazers.org](mailto:brette@stcroixtrailblazers.org)



Please remember to check your spam or junk folder for any updates from St. Croix Trail Blazers.



If you bring a new rider who joins the team, we'll give you \$50 off your next month's fee!

\*\*\*Rider must pass evaluation with instructor.\*\*\*



*Special People Needing Special Horses*

## Contact Us



Email: [karen@stcroixtrailblazers.org](mailto:karen@stcroixtrailblazers.org)

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St. Croix Trail Blazers is tax-exempt under Section 501(c)3 of the Internal Revenue Service.

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