

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

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A ticket to ride: Carriage group lets disabled enjoy life in the outdoors

By Denis Cuff
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MARTINEZ - Riding horses has been tougher for Abigail Stockinger since a car accident left her legs paralyzed five years ago.

She returned to the saddle but has had to limit her riding pace to a walk.

But Stockinger was trotting again Saturday with a breeze blowing through her auburn hair.

With her wheelchair locked into position in a specially built horse cart, she became the first Martinez rider in an unusual new program that uses horse-drawn carriages to carry disabled people into the outdoors.

The group's founder, Michael Muir, great-grandson of legendary conservationist John Muir, views carriages as a means of freedom for disabled people to go beyond their physical limits.

"I have never done this before. Sorry if I'm slow," Stockinger said Saturday, as the 25-year-old Pleasant Hill woman prepared to become the first passenger.

Volunteers told her to take her time.

They rolled her in a wheelchair up a ramp into an Amish-built cart modified to hold a wheelchair.

Volunteer driver Susan Hassett, a professional carriage driver, pulled on the reins to spur her Morgan horse into action. The half-ton animal lurched forward and pulled the cart up a steep hill with views of Mount Diablo and San Francisco Bay.

A half-hour later, Stockinger returned exuberant despite a temporary leg spasm triggered by the ride.

"It's awesome. I can go a lot faster in the cart," she said. "It's a very smooth ride. You can really see the scenery when you don't have to be the one steering the horse."

Stockinger isn't about to give up riding her own horse but plans to ride again with Muir's group.

The organization has no name yet, but it does have ambitious plans.

"We want disabled people to be able to get out and enjoy the outdoors," Muir said. "A wheelchair is not a prison. It's a tool to get around."

Muir's own experiences motivated him to rally his friends who ride horses and carriages to start the program.

A rancher and horse breeder who grew up in Dixon, Muir was forced to abandon horse riding at age 40 because multiple sclerosis made it too difficult to balance on a horse.

He turned to horse-drawn carriages, competed in races, and in 2001 drove across the country in a carriage.

Now, he's sticking closer to home to organize regular weekend carriage rides on natural lands at two locations.

He is partnering with the Muir Heritage Land Trust for rides at Dutra Ranch in the Martinez hills. The Solano Land Trust is offering its Rush Ranch near Fairfield and Suisun City as the second location.

It took 25 or more volunteers to stage the three-hour Saturday event that gave rides to six disabled people, three of them in wheelchairs.

Muir hopes to raise funds to buy or improve carriages.

People taking the free rides do not have to use a wheelchair, but accommodating wheelchairs is the biggest challenge for the fledgling group.

Muir has one wheelchair-carrying cart. The group borrowed a second carriage for the Saturday event.

"We're off to a good start," Muir said, "but giving rides to three people in wheelchairs in three hours shows that we need more resources."

He hopes to raise money to overhaul a farm vehicle called a dray to carry six people in wheelchairs at once.

Ian Mackey, 22, of Berkeley, was eager to ride Saturday because he likes the outdoors but finds it difficult to take trails in his wheelchair.

Born with muscular dystrophy, he cannot walk, but he is familiar with overcoming barriers.

Mackey generated headlines when he enrolled at UC Berkeley at the age of 15.

His electric wheelchair was too heavy for the horse cart Saturday, so event organizers loaded him into the cart in a manually powered wheelchair and had his mother sit on the cart to steady him.

After his carriage trip, Mackey was stoked about seeing hawks soar above the open hills.

"It's a wonderful way to enjoy nature, said Mackey, who aspires to become an environmental lawyer. "I definitely want to do it again."

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RIDES FOR THE DISABLED

For information on how to help or to get a ride, call Michael Muir at 707-426-3990 or the Muir Heritage Land Trust at 925-228-5460.

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