

News

Make a difference in your community— volunteer

by Susan Bromley

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Editor's note: Make a Difference Day is Oct. 23. This is the first in a 2-part series about ways you can make a difference by volunteering in your community. This week, learn how you can help through O.A.T.S. and the Ortonville Community Emergency Fund. Next week: Brandon Groveland Youth Assistance and Genesys Hospice.

Brandon Twp.- Mike Barnes strolled a path lined with trees aglow with autumn leaves on Tuesday, alongside a horse and special rider, savoring the sunshine and the end of his first week as a volunteer.

Barnes lives near O.A.T.S. (Offering Alternative Therapy with Smiles, Inc.), a therapeutic horseback riding facility located at 3090 Weidemann Drive, and had always been interested in horses. When he learned O.A.T.S., was in need of volunteers, he decided to step forward. Now, he helps in their mission to provide adults and children with special needs therapy through interaction with horses.

"I thought it would be a great thing for the horses, for the kids, and most of all, for me," said Barnes. "I was right. It's awesome."

Nancy Heussner, founder and executive director of O.A.T.S., is looking for more people like Mike.

"We are always in need of volunteers helping with our horses and riders as leader or side walker of a horse to protect our riders," she said. "The most important thing we need is a smile. Once we get them here, we can figure out where they fit in."

At O.A.T.S., the youngest rider is 18-months-old and the oldest is 74-years-old. Riders can have emotional, physical, and/or learning disabilities, but most benefit from their time spent with the horses— with improvement to balance, posture, large and small muscle strength, motivation, and perhaps most importantly, their self-esteem.

Any amount of time a volunteer can give is appreciated. O.A.T.S. operates five days a week. Some volunteers can give an hour a week, some can give five hours a week. Some can't do all the walking with the horses, but their computer skills are needed. Or perhaps they want to help with grooming horses, tacking, cleaning stalls, or feeding the horses.

Volunteers must be at least 10-years-old and mature, ready to enrich the lives of others. To apply to be a volunteer, go online at www.oatshrh.org.

The Ortonville Community Emergency Fund needs volunteers, too. The organization that assists low-income residents in feeding their families has volunteer jobs available that can be done once a month, or even just at the holidays.

In the food pantry, volunteers are needed to restock shelves and move inventory. Client assistants are scheduled once a month when groceries are given out. Once a week on Thursday mornings, volunteers are needed to pick up outdated products from Whole Foods Market.

With Thanksgiving and Christmas quickly approaching, volunteers are also needed for the food sort and more client assistance.

"We have something to suit everyone's tastes," said OCEF Treasurer Margaret Lee. "Volunteering is an expression of compassion and reaching out to others in your neighborhood."

To become an OCEF volunteer, contact Gwen Koss at 248-627-3965.