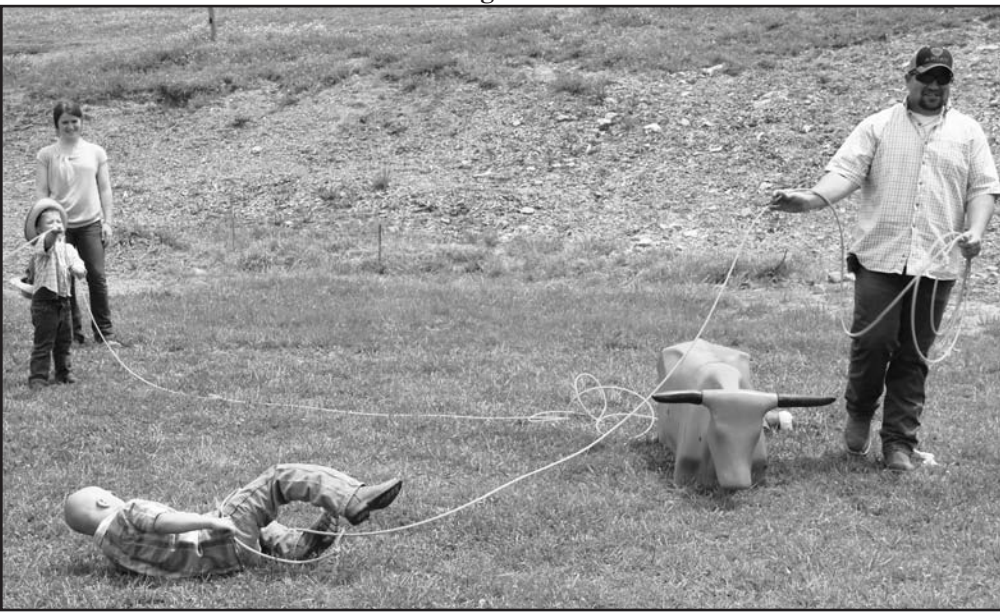


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A ranchhand wrangles in a live one at Joshua Dream Ranch. Photo/Shawn Jarrard

Joshua Dream Ranch is a one-of-a-kind entity for the region.

Through the guidance of owner Gino Zalunardo and his many dedicated supporters, the Ranch specializes in animal-assisted therapy, with a stated goal of “providing an atmosphere and resources to promote healing, courage and hope.”

Zalunardo named the Ranch for his son Joshua, who passed away eight years ago at Egleston Children’s Hospital in Atlanta.

“He was out playing soccer, fishing, hunting – just a normal child,” said Zalunardo.

“He was really tired one day, so I took him in to get a physical and they found a tumor in his neck. They told me that night that my son would have a year to live.”

At just 14 years of age, Joshua was diagnosed with a brainstem glioma, a cancer that spreads throughout the nervous system. Before he died, Joshua planted a seed in his father’s mind, a seed that would grow and become the inspiration for Joshua Dream Ranch.

“He had chemo and radiation, so he was sitting there, lethargic in the hospital,” said Zalunardo. “They brought a dog in, a Great Pyrenees. The dog jumped up on the bed and started licking Joshua, and I realized that there was a con-

nection between the human and the animals. That dog brought joy and life to him.

“While I was in Egleston, I realized how many sick kids there were in America – Down syndrome, autistic, leukemia, cancer for children. So I wanted to use animals to bring hope and joy to children.”

Enter Joshua Dream Ranch, an outdoor experience like no other, with an emphasis on children from all walks and regions of life. There, kids who have motor impairment, for example, can learn the joys of riding horseback in a safe, controlled environment.

And there are myriad other animals for children to embrace, such as goats, bunnies, chickens, a Shetland pony, an enormous Belgian horse, ranch dogs, Mr. and Mrs. Piggie, Jack the Donkey, Roscoe the Gentle Cow and more.

Animal-assisted therapy, also known as pet therapy, has been shown to reduce stress and anxiety, and help to elevate mood and energy levels, according to Zalunardo.

“Humans naturally judge, but animals, they don’t care if a kid has Down syndrome or is autistic – they just love, and that’s what we do, we give back that way,” said Zalunardo.

So far, the Ranch has played host to a number of

school children with special needs in the area, including Towns and Union counties, as well as kids from Murphy, North Carolina, and beyond, and the reach of the Ranch extends even beyond children, to veterans of wars, for instance, or to anyone with a disability who could benefit from the Ranch.

Of course, running the nonprofit Joshua Dream Ranch takes a lot of support, as the children and families who attend the ranch for its restorative purposes are not charged for their visits.

Community and corporate sponsors, or partners, are invited to contribute toward making sure Joshua Dream Ranch builds upon its initial success.

Donations go to fulfill monthly maintenance and operation costs for the Ranch, which are \$3,000 and take into account insurance, feed, hay and bedding for all animals, shoes for the horses, veterinary bills, etc.

Zalunardo is also looking to expand the Ranch’s capabilities by bringing in a wheelchair lift, a specialized saddle for individuals with disabilities, and various other items to enhance the experiences of those who attend, all of which will need to be purchased with assistance from partnering sponsors and donations.

To learn more about getting involved, either through volunteerism or monetary support, or to ask about making a visit to the Ranch, call (706) 333-5363. Also, check out Joshua Dream Ranch on Facebook and on the web.