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# Gentle healing mixed with nature and art

**For people with brain injuries, Hinds' Feet Farm offers a safe, holistic haven.**

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Slideshow



Tim Childers walks with his caregiver, Flo McLurkin, to the barn to help with morning chores at Hinds' Feet Farm. Chores include feeding the cats and horses and walking the miniature horse to pasture. PHOTOS BY L.MUELLER – [lmuell@charlotteob](mailto:lmuell@charlotteob)

## HUNTERSVILLE

Kate Thompson, 32, used to sit in her Kannapolis home and watch TV all day.

Then she and her family discovered Hinds' Feet Farm.

Kate now spends her mornings and afternoons feeding and petting horses and miniature donkeys, learning tai chi and chatting with friends at the 36-acre wooded refuge off N.C. 73 and Black Farms Road between Huntersville and Concord.

The farm is for residents like Kate who have brain injuries.

Here they commune with nature, try yoga and glass art and learn it's OK to share feelings.

They come up with lines for poems and create stone mosaics. They relax on couches in a building that resembles a mountain lodge. It's called The Ark.

"It's about holistic health and wellness," executive director Martin Foil III said. "All God's children want to be doing something meaningful. We're giving them things they find meaningful and that give them a reason to get up in the morning."

Foil's family opened the nonprofit farm last year on land his parents, Martin II and Puddin, bought years ago to one day make into a safe, enriching place for people with brain injuries.

The Foils' son Philip, Martin's younger brother, suffered a traumatic brain injury in December 1984.

Then 16, Philip was driving home from Concord High School when a car crossed a center line and slammed into his car. Philip was in a coma for 114 days before waking up and needing constant care.

The Foils discovered that many people with traumatic brain injuries fall through the cracks of the nation's medical system. Brain injuries aren't always formally recognized, and families who must care for the victims undergo tremendous stress.

People with brain injuries end up "marginalized and fragmented in society," said Will DeGrauw, a professional rehabilitation counselor who runs the Hinds' Feet day program.

Hinds' Feet Farm, on the other hand, "is a place to come and be a participant," Martin Foil III said.

The farm is one of only 18 programs in the country that offer a more holistic approach, rather than the more traditional medical approach of treating symptoms, he said.

For people with brain injury, "that holistic approach has been shown to be more effective overall," said Greg Ayotte, director of consumer services for the Brain Injury Association of America in Vienna, Va.

At Hinds' Feet – named after an Old Testament reference to the ability to overcome difficult challenges – the word "problems" doesn't exist, Foil said. "We use the word 'challenges,'" he said.

The farm offers a different activity hourly for its 18 members, who come from Concord, Cornelius, Salisbury, University City, Charlotte, Matthews and beyond.

Tom Cushman of Beckley, W.Va., brings his son Miles, 31, who suffered a brain injury in a 1999 car wreck while he was a student at Virginia Tech.

"This is nice and relaxed," Miles said of the farm. "It's a sweet deal."

The Cushmans stay at a friend's home at Lake Norman on the weeks they visit the farm. The farm has no attendance requirements. The families of members – the farm refuses to call them “clients” – choose their weeks and days.

Members suggest activities the farm ends up offering to the entire group. They even invented what they call “Retro '80s Dance Move Tai Chi.”

On the day I visited, everyone seemed very at ease, from how they sang “Happy Birthday” to how some of them ribbed the staff.

When a sweating DeGrauw finished leading a tai chi routine, member Ron Bailey Jr., 31, of Charlotte joked, “Will needs a nap. Go home!”

Miles Cushman teased Foil so much he almost apologized. “I like to give you a hard time,” he told Foil. “But I just want you to know I'm just being silly most of the time.”

The farm encourages the camaraderie.

“A big focus here is social interaction, things we take for granted, like meeting people you're unfamiliar with,” DeGrauw said.

I was most struck, however, by how the members shared their feelings during a private group discussion on the changing of the seasons and the changes within themselves.

DeGrauw later turned their words into a poem that the group asked me to read aloud at the end of the day.

“Yes, we can!” it ends.

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