

Horsing around serious business at Eagle Mount

Fun, flexibility and 'family benefits' create engaging work atmosphere

By PETER JOHNSON
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Imagine overseeing 300 volunteers who help run 16 recreational and therapy programs a year for nearly 450 special needs children and adults.

Eagle Mount Great Falls executive director Deb Sivumaki and her board have chosen to administer the programs with a great deal of flexibility.

Since most of the programs actually take place after school, evenings and weekends after day-time planning, she lets her five full-time employees work flexible schedules, encourages the small staff to help each other out on big pending deadlines and readily allows them to bring a child or pet to work in a pinch.

"We pay decent, but not exorbitant, wages but try to share duties and make the work enjoyable so we can keep good employees. That way program participants can get to know and count on us," Sivumaki said.

Heather Martin, operations coordinator and a 14-year employee, nominated the non-profit group as "the best place to work" in the Tribune's Business Achievement Awards.

"When I go to work, I feel like I'm going home to my second family," she said. "We receive regular employee benefits, including decent pay, health insurance and vacation, but it's the 'family benefits' that are priceless."

Martin noted that employees are:

- Encouraged to share in colleagues' projects and learn as much as they can.

- Allowed to bring their children to work if childcare falls through or work from home if a child is sick.

- Permitted to work flexible hours around family activities, making up for evening or weekend tasks.

And there are a couple of

other unusual perks in working for Eagle Mount, which recently consolidated its operations south of town.

"If I'm having a stressful day in the office, I can go next door to the riding center and pet a horse and give it love," Martin said. "Even scooping poop can be relaxing. After a few minutes, I'm refreshed and ready to get back to work."

It also is rewarding, after hours of desk planning and phone calls, to actually work with program participants, she said.



Sivumaki



Best Place to Work

"When you see participants, parents and volunteers enjoying themselves, your heart just melts and you remember what you're here for and can't want to come back to work tomorrow," Martin said.

The private, non-profit organization got its start in Great Falls in 1990, branching off a Bozeman program.

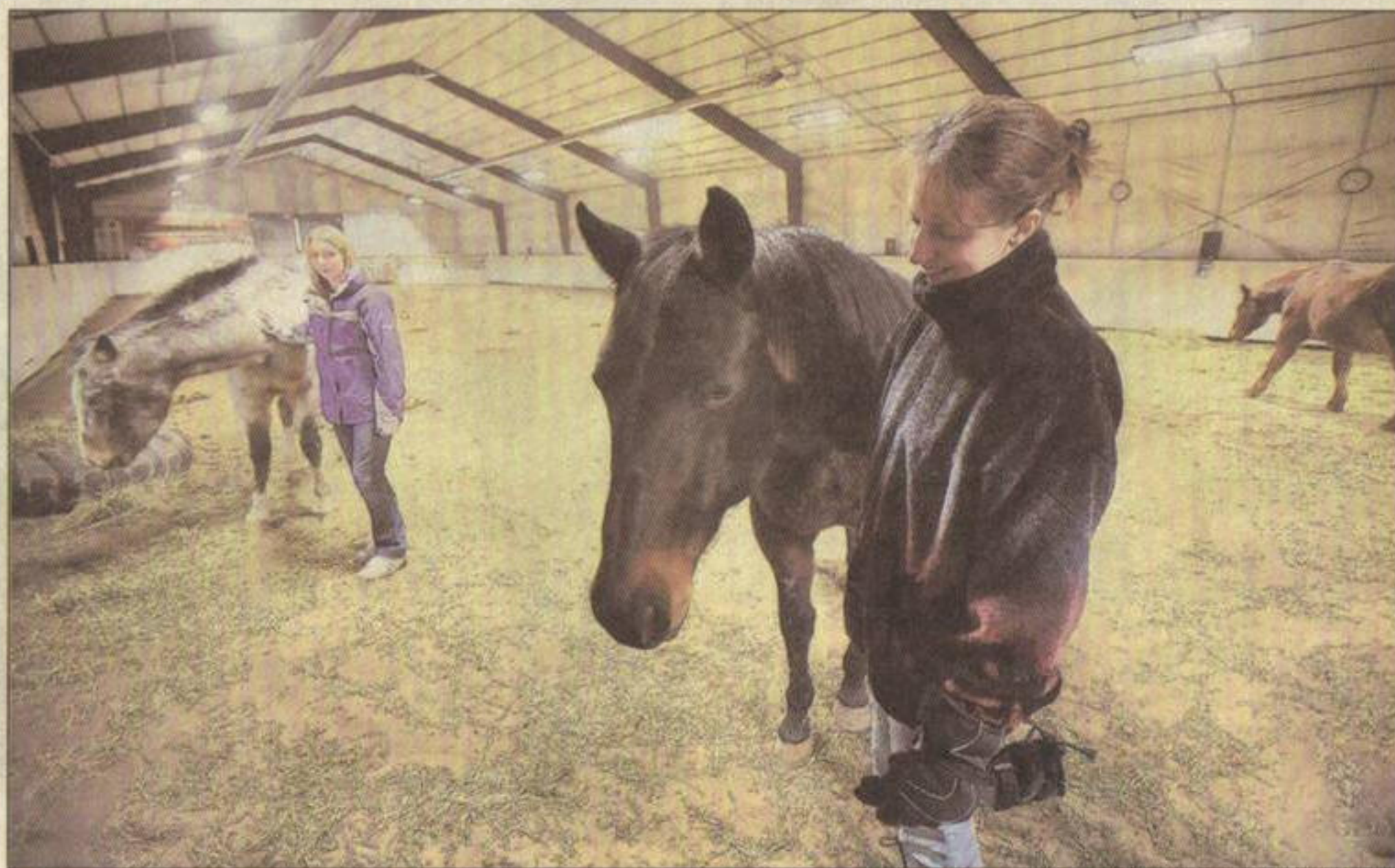
It's best known for its equestrian program south of town and its skiing program at Showdown, but Eagle Mount offers 16 activities and serves an age range from 6 weeks to 102 years.

Other programs include karate, bowling, rafting, brain-based creative movements for infants and toddlers and pontoon boat rides for elderly and severely disabled participants.

Eagle Mount provides therapeutic and recreational activities at little or no cost to children and adults with physical, mental and behavioral challenges diagnosed by doctors.

For instance, an autistic child that has trouble focusing is allowed to trot his horse as a reward if he can quietly walk it around the arena twice, said equestrian program director Val Clark. The 13 older, donated horses, pony and donkey work well with disabled riders, but often have health needs of their own, such as arthritis.

Primary funding for the program comes from individual, corporate and foundation



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Dani Beers, left, and Heather Martin visit with a few of the horses at the Eagle Mount riding center.

contributions and grants, with a big social fundraiser, the Margarita Meltdown, scheduled for Jan. 23 at the Four Seasons Arena.

Like other business and non-profit managers, Sivumaki is concerned about the economic slowdown.

Financial contributions, but not donated time, began to fall last summer with high fuel and food prices, she said.

"We do everything as a group, with all the employees making suggestions," she added.

During one brainstorming session, the group decided to cut rental costs and consolidate operations.

Eagle Mount closed its downtown office in September and moved to a large mobile home it had been renting out that's next to its riding center and near its activities center. All are south of Great Falls near the former Ayrshire Dairy.

Employees chose colors and redecorated the three-bedroom trailer into office space. Much of the day's initial planning is done as



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Eagle Mount staff from left, Val Clark, Deb Sivumaki, Jill Van Son and Heather Martin sit and plan in the new Eagle Mount main office.

employees informally sip coffee in the kitchen.

The group socializes together, including a Christmas party playing Wii video game bowling and tennis with their spouses.

"We really like and support each other, except when they

joke that I smell bad when I come in from the horse barn," Clark quipped. More seriously, she noted that everybody takes a turn feeding horses on weekends.

"We try to keep things light and help each other out," Sivumaki said. "I can allow

employees flexible hours and working from home when they need to because they all have great work ethic and get their jobs done."

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