



PHOTOS BY A.J. SILVA AT VAN GUARD STABLES IN BOW N.H.

# OPENING WORLDS OF SPEECH with Hippotherapy

by Dutch Henry

Toby lifted four-year-old Nathan's tiny hand and touched it to the horse's withers. She tapped the horse gently with Nathan's hand while saying, "Go." The horse stepped forward. Nathan smiled. She held his hand and tapped the horse again, while clearly giving the verbal command, "Go." The horse took another step. Nathan's grin widened. Toby released Nathan's hand and looked encouragingly into the boy's eyes as the horse waited for his next cue. Without hesitation Nathan tapped the horse. Nothing happened. The smile faded from Nathan's face, but he tapped the horse again. And again. Toby smiled at him, touched her finger to her lips and mouthed the word command. Nathan struggled to understand, but Toby continued to demonstrate, waiting patiently for him to try again. Suddenly Nathan's face lit up, he tapped the horse and blurted, "Go horsey!" The first words he'd ever spoken.

Nathan had been diagnosed as "developmentally delayed" and had never talked. His mother had heard of Toby Freeman's Hippotherapy program, called "HorseTalks," for children with speech difficulties and enrolled him because traditional means of therapy had not seemed to help.

Toby, an accomplished rider, was born with an addiction to horses and had always had them in her life. She became fascinated with communication and speech at a very young

age. Her Great Aunt and Great Uncle were deaf, and when Toby was about six she began to notice they had a dynamic way of communicating. While other family members would communicate with them by writing, it seemed so limiting to her. She began to watch their body language and even their eyebrows. She studied the way they used their hands to talk to each other in a combination of finger spelling and sign language. They taught her their method and it allowed her to join them in their world. That was the first time Toby felt the inner connection that lies within people with speech limitations. It was the first time she felt the wonderful feeling of opening worlds.

*Suddenly Nathan's face lit up,  
he tapped the horse and blurted,  
"Go horsey!" The first words  
he'd ever spoken.*

When Toby was thirteen her babysitter, Rae, suffered a stroke which left her with significant speech difficulties. Toby remembers her mother taking her to visit their beloved



Helping to create  
a better world...

friend. It was such an emotional moment for Toby when Rae greeted them, as they entered her hospital room, that she remembers the words. "Hi Jimmy, the sunset's beautiful." Puzzled, Toby watched as the kindly woman struggled to communicate and finally realized Rae was saying, "Hi Toby, how are you today?"

At that young age, Toby found herself frustrated by what happened to someone's ability to communicate when stricken with a stroke. From then on she began to study language and speech, spending her free time submerged in encyclopedias at the library. By the time she entered high school she knew she was going to use her gift of loving language and communication to help people open new worlds. Toby charted the path then to go to college to become a speech and language pathologist. By the age of seventeen, Toby was fluent in four languages.

Toby earned her Masters of Science degree from the University of Michigan in Speech-Language Pathology in 1978 and devoted herself to helping children and adults learn the joy and power of speech and communication. After working in various clinics and hospital settings, in 1985 Toby opened her own practice to provide traditional speech/language therapy to children and adults. Her practice grew and she was enjoying many successes and thrilling moments opening doors to new worlds for her clients. But sometimes

traditional therapy would seem to plateau, leaving her frustrated and filled with a desire to do more. But there seemed to be no answers to certain roadblocks.

Then when she'd been practicing for twenty years, her father was diagnosed with a very aggressive form of cancer. Toby visited and cared for her father daily. To help manage her sorrow, she would end her days at the barn. Riding her horse and just being with him, feeling the sustained motion beneath her, brushing him, loving him, or simply crying into his mane would lift her spirits. He helped her clear her mind. She'd always known of the connection horses could make with people, if the people would listen. Toby was listening. She felt a stronger power to focus and ability to cope building within as she listened to her horse. One day she had an epiphany. She thought of her clients who needed something more to help them open doors. She thought of the ADHD and Autistic children who had so many sensory issues to combat. And she thought of the magic of motion. She asked herself, "Why can't I bring the children to the horses?" Toby calls that epiphany her father's last gift. He went to heaven in just a few months.

She immediately began to research, "Horses and Therapy." Toby found that people had been doing it for more than thirty years for physical therapy, working with physically impaired patients from stroke and head injury, spinal cord injury patients and occupational therapists working on posture and balance and fine motor abilities in children. Confident that therapy with horses would be able to help her clients with speech-language challenges, Toby set out to find a way to become educated in equine assisted therapy. She discovered there was a program for certification in Georgia. She became American Hippotherapy Association Level 1 trained and on June 3, 2008, Toby completed the certification process as a North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA) clinical riding instructor for therapeutic riding. NARHA is now known as Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH Intl.).

With the purchase of a special Quarter Horse mare and borrowing a child from her existing clientele, Toby began using hippotherapy to open doors of communication with her clients. Currently, in her traditional speech-language therapy program, Toby sees about fifty patients a week with about ten going to "HorseTalk" hippotherapy sessions.

Toby has three horses in the HorseTalk stable. The hippotherapy sessions are designed to address a wide variety of client needs such as autism, receptive/expressive language disorders, auditory processing disorders, language learning



disabilities, stuttering, stroke, cerebral palsy, psychological disorders and other conditions that impact a person's ability to communicate.

*The children see that the horse is honest, and feel the reward when the horse responds to their touch, or word.*

Toby explained that a horse has a remarkable way of receiving communication, and processing it. A horse has a magical way of filtering out blockages and fears to understand what the client is communicating. All of Toby's programs are based on rewarding the patient for success. Many times, the first time a client feels the joy of communicating with ease is on a horse in a session. The children see that the horse is honest, and feel the reward when the horse responds to their touch, or word. But there is more than that. Some of it is physical, too. The feeling of sitting on a horse, the power, the warmth. The movement of the horse as they are led around the arena

stimulates the very core of the client. It can make it easier to breathe, sit upright, and focus. Some parts of the lessons are as simple as sitting on the horse and playing with a doll. They may start out simply brushing the horse. They may play catch with a ball sitting on the horse. Sometimes they have never tossed a ball before. Or experienced smell.

Sadly, Nathan developed an allergy to horses and no longer goes to ride, but he continues to improve and expand his world by sessions with Toby in traditional therapy. Many times her HorseTalk clients require only a few sessions with horses to break through the barriers and open their world of speech and communication. They can then continue on with traditional therapy, building on the progress started by an understanding horse. Some of them carry over their new learned skills to novel settings within a few weeks. 🐾

*To learn more about HorseTalk's programs or to talk with Toby about hippotherapy for speech, visit their website at [www.nhhorsetalk.com](http://www.nhhorsetalk.com).*

*Dutch Henry is a freelance writer and novelist who resides in Virginia with his wife, Robin, of 35 years, horse, dogs, cats and chickens. You can reach Dutch at [dutchhenry@hughes.net](mailto:dutchhenry@hughes.net). His novel "We'll Have the Summer" is available on Amazon and Dutch's website [www.dutchhenryauthor.com](http://www.dutchhenryauthor.com).*

