

# Helping bridge the gap

Famed horse expert visits NAC equine center

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Posted at ParkRecord.com: 01/28/2011 04:57:47 PM MST

	
<p>(Grayson West/Park Record) Famed horse trainer and equine expert Buck Brannaman speaks to a small group of people at the National Ability Center equine center. Brannaman has been in Park City since his film Buck debuted at the Sundance Film Festival.</p>	<p>(Grayson West/Park Record) Three-year-old Lucy Heimburger participates in a hippotherapy session assisted by Kim Desautels (center), Emily Sadow and Michelle Schweiger (cap), Wednesday afternoon at the NAC.</p>

Matt Heimburger has always dreamt his soon-to-be three-year-old daughter Lucy would one day say, "I love you, daddy."

But that probably will never happen.

Lucy is diagnosed with Rett syndrome, a neurodevelopment disorder caused by a mutated gene located on the X chromosome. According to Heimburger, a child with Rett syndrome generally avoids detection until 12-to-18 months of age.

Infants generally can learn to walk and talk before Rett syndrome kicks in and wipes it all away. With Lucy, her father said, Rett kicked in a little sooner than that.

"It seems normal at first because the body needs this particular coding that isn't fully formed yet," he said. "But once it kind of hits, the body makes an adjustment for a missing code."

According to Matt, there are about 30 reported cases of Rett syndrome in Utah and an estimated one in every 30,000 children born will eventually develop Rett syndrome. Most infants diagnosed with Rett syndrome won't be able to learn to walk or talk again.

Lucy had an early intervention with occupational and speech therapists since her diagnosis, and now seems to have found a hobby that brings a constant smile to her face.

Lucy rides horses.

After hearing about hippotherapy a form of occupational therapy which uses the movements and distinctiveness of a horse to present physical and cognitive input Matt and his wife figured they had to give it a shot.

"You simply don't know what you're going to get unless you try," he said.

"If you do nothing, you get nothing."

As Lucy approaches her tenth session with Kim Desautels, the hippotherapy program manager at the National Ability Center (NAC), Matt sees tremendous progress when his daughter rides.

"We see this as a long-term commitment," he said. "There is nothing that Lucy responds to as much as she responds to this."

And Lucy had a famous spectator cheering her on Wednesday morning, too.

Buck Brannaman, famed horse trainer and equine relationship expert, was invited to the NAC to speak to the equine staff and field questions. Brannaman has been in Park City for the debut of the documentary film appropriately named "Buck," about his life as a horseman being showed at the Sundance Film Festival.

"The horse acts as sort of a bridge," Brannaman said, addressing the group. "It seems like you get to a certain point and the human being only has so much to offer, maybe nothing. It helps fill that gap for people."

Brannaman, one of the individual inspirations for the Nicholas Evans' best-selling book "The Horse Whisperer," has been working with horses since he was 12 and is widely viewed as a prominent voice in horse psychology and communication.

"It's amazing what a horse has to offer," he said.

As Brannaman fielded questions, Lucy trotted around the arena at the NAC barn, going through different hippotherapy practices. Matt said Lucy's attentiveness skyrockets when she's riding and he thinks the familiarity of movement of the horse is what brings smiles to her inquisitive face.

"To do it on a moving target, where she's having to stimulate herself while they're giving her input, I think that helps," he said. "I think she really reacts to it."

"I think there's a connection with this animal. She can feel the movements. I believe this will be a part of her life forever."

Brannaman couldn't help but notice as Lucy combed down her pony, Tulip, after the riding session with the guidance of Desautels and other staff members.

He had kind words for the staff, saying, "You're pretty lucky to be able to go home at night, and every day when you go home from work, feel like you did something good."

Matt and his wife have two older sons, Fischer (13) and Mason (9), who are cross-country skiers and he said, they've always been a big help with their little sister.

Since partaking in hippotherapy, Lucy has been getting stronger. She's able to sit on her knees and maintain her balance, something that has to be viewed as a positive considering where she started from.

"Before, she couldn't even sit up on her own," Matt said. "She has the drive and desire to do things. This helps her body and mind remember."

Brannaman continued to answer questions and praised the NAC for what it has been able to do with the advances in hippotherapy. He reiterated that his work with horses is not done and may never be.

"A lot of people ask me, they say, 'When're you going to retire?'" Brannaman said. "I just look at them like, 'Are you nuts?' I don't want that to ever happen I'm scared one day I'm going to have to. I'll figure out a way where I won't have to."

One thing's for certain: he has a fellow horse admirer in Lucy Heroe Heimbürger.