



BRENDAN FITTERER | Times

Amy Baird, owner of Rockin' Horse Farm, gives Zippy, a 4-year-old quarter horse, some affection. The farm has covered stalls connected to adjoining paddocks where horses can hang out as a group. "We wanted them to socialize and bond," Baird says.

» HORSE FARM continued from 1

It may not be horse heaven, but it's close

"As a kid, I was always an animal person who loved stray cats, dogs, rabbits — but we didn't have much space," she recalls. "And horseback riding lessons were out of the question."

Baird spent her childhood visiting relatives in the Tampa Bay area. She grew to love Florida so much that she enrolled at St. Petersburg College and eventually ended up working at the Clearwater Marine Aquarium, where she learned about dolphins, whales and manatees.

"I was the one who taught Sunset Sam to paint," she recalls with a laugh.

Baird is taken with the mysteries of animal behavior. She is intrigued by dolphin pods and horse herds and how creatures socialize. She considers herself an entrepreneur and somewhat of a nonconformist. She's taught yoga, renovated houses and become a passionate advocate of homeschooling.

Not surprisingly, she homeschools her daughters, Megan Brusselback, 12, and Alyssa Brusselback, 14, both pretty, soft-spoken girls who have the same love for animals their mother does.

"Life lessons are what I believe in, building upon whatever experience happens that day," Baird says.

She met her husband, Matt Brusselback, who for years has owned Custom Four Wheel Drive in New Port Richey, while she was still a college student. Over the years, they fixed up and sold houses and raised their three children, the oldest of whom, Adam, is now 18.

A few years ago, the family was living in a stilt house in Palm Harbor not far from the Gulf of Mexico when Amy felt that familiar nudge. She still dreamed of owning a piece of property big enough for horses and a menagerie of animals.

In 2004, the couple bought 7 acres along Platte Road and a 3,000-square-foot house that needed so much work Baird jokes that her husband didn't want to move in at first. In 2006, they bought the second parcel, a 10-acre swath that allowed them to fulfill their dream of having a family-friendly farm and riding stable.

Baird designed the barn and outbuildings (including a unique chicken coop and pig pen) and Brusselback built them. The 10-stall barn, a Florida-style building designed to catch cross breezes, features covered stalls connected to individual adjoining paddocks where horses can hang out as a group whenever they feel like it.

"We wanted to allow horses to be horses," Baird says. "I wasn't going to build box stalls like a jail. We wanted them to socialize and bond."

The couple put up a black split-rail fence, cleared acres of sand trails and designed riding rings and paddocks. With the devel-



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Claire Milec rides Lava bareback during riding lessons with instructor/trainer Sarah Sanders, background, at the farm, which also offers boarding, birthday parties and a summer camp.



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Alyssa Brusselback, 14, climbs up the swimming hole steps from the Pithlachascotee River on her family's 17-acre farm.

opment of the farm came an animal-friendly philosophy: feed is hand-mixed for better nutrition; horses essentially go barefoot (without horseshoes) "because of the soft sandy ground," Baird says, and to stimulate better circulation in their legs.

Over time, the family slowly began acquiring an array of gentle horses and ponies, including Ragtime, the Shetland pony that can give kisses, kick a soccer ball and stand on his hind legs.

"We really do think he might have come from a circus somewhere," Baird said as she fed him a handful of sunflower seeds and gave him a kiss on his velvet-soft nose.

Rockin' Horse Farm officially opened its riding stable in January 2007. Megan thought of the name after she found an old wooden rocking horse in a shed on the property.

"We took the 'g' off 'rocking' because we thought it was more hip," she says with a laugh.

On the farm's Web site, rockinhorsefarm.org, the family describes the farm as a "casual barn that caters to the little girl or boy who always wanted a horse."

They offer riding lessons, boarding, birthday parties, a summer camp and a Friday night "parents' night out" Pony Club for children.

Adults ride here, too, by the way; they come for relaxing and scenic after-work trail rides or to lease or board their own horses.

The farm doesn't advertise; it relies on word-of-mouth endorsements, fliers posted at schools and a Web site designed by Baird and son Adam, who is a computer whiz.

"It's like a big family — even if you love horses and don't want

to ride, you can just hang out," says Sarah Sanders, 18, a trainer and instructor at Rockin' Horse. "I loved this place from the moment I first saw it. It's really gorgeous the way the river runs along the trails."

Late on a weekday morning, Baird and her two daughters walked the trails and crossed the river on the truck bed bridge; for a while, they lingered by the spring-fed swimming hole. The water was so clean that despite a 15-foot drop to the bottom, the water looked as shallow as a bathtub.

A couple of fish darted just below the surface; a rooster crowed in the distance; and a lovely Paint quarter horse named Tara watched everything from a nearby paddock.

"It's so peaceful and pretty here — it makes me happy," Baird says. "It's the best of Florida in a package — the only thing missing is the beach."

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Traffic biggest issue locally, survey says

BY EBONY WINDOM
Times Correspondent

ZEPHYRHILLS — It seems traffic congestion is the biggest issue on the minds of Zephyrhills residents these days.

A citizen satisfaction survey administered by graduate students at the University of South Florida found that 68 percent of the residents polled cited heavy traffic as a major concern. Crime and growth were other big issues for locals.

Recently, 1,300 Zephyrhills residents were mailed a survey to gauge their satisfaction.

The survey results, which were noted in a 1-inch thick packet, were made available at Monday's City Council meeting.

In other business, the council agreed to renew its contract with a local accounting company for the next few years. Zephyrhills-based Baggett-Henson CPAs will

continue to serve the city for \$33,000 each year until 2013.

Baggett-Henson also made available findings from an independent city audit during the meeting Monday.

The council also agreed to move forward with its plans to buy an acre of land for about \$45,000 in order to construct a well north of Pretty Pond Road. Also, the city agreed to hire D.R. Swanson Co. to perform upgrades to the city's lift station No. 2 at 19th Street and Eighth Avenue.

The upgrades include new well pumps and controls and would cost the city an estimated \$122,000.

Luke Thomas was recognized at the meeting as the valedictorian of Zephyrhills High School.

The city's mayor, W. Cliff McDuffie, honored Sgt. Marcus Mathes, a Zephyrhills resident who was killed in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

» DEVIN continued from 1

Mom holds on to hope for son, home

Hospital on April 28, after a doctor there spotted dark patches on his hip and upper thigh in an X-ray.

An MRI and blood work led doctors to suspect Devin had leukemia. To be sure, doctors removed some bone marrow with a needle for a lab test.

The results of the test, combined with the tumors that showed up on Devin's MRI, meant one thing: neuroblastoma.

Deschaine wasn't sure how to handle the news.

"I had a nervous breakdown," she said. "I left the room and came back. I was thinking, 'This is my 2-year-old son.' I said, 'No, this isn't true. He does not have cancer.'"

Since the ordeal began, Deschaine's mother, Suzanne Belhumeur, has been by her side at the hospital.

"It's turned our whole world upside down," Belhumeur said. "It's all out of my control."

Devin has been undergoing hourlong stints of chemotherapy since Friday. His first round of chemotherapy will end today.

His mother made sure he has a few creature comforts: his baby blue blanket with the baseballs on it and his Curious George doll. His grandfather brings him dill pickles, his favorite food.

"He's been such a little trooper," Deschaine said of her son during treatment. "He's been handling it so well."

He could go home in a few days, but must return to the hospital every other week until he has had eight rounds of chemotherapy. By then, doctors hope his tumors shrink and can be removed. Deschaine's health insurance is paying for her son's treatment.

While at the hospital, Deschaine, a nurse in Clearwater, has used up the six days of vacation she gets from her job. This week marks her third week of unpaid leave. She doesn't have the money for this month's rent and expects to be evicted soon.

When Devin leaves the hospital, he and his mother will need a place to live. Their friends are organizing fundraisers.

Devin's babysitter, Heather Mendaras, said her sons are approaching local business owners about placing spare change jars at their establishments to raise money for the Deschaines. Her co-workers also want to help and are brainstorming ideas for fundraisers.

Deschaine is resting on the hope that her son defies the odds and beats his disease.

"I have all faith that he will be okay," she said. "Since day one, he has been a fighter ... he's going to make it. It'll just be a rough time getting there."

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Civic | Fraternal groups

The following groups and organizations meet regularly in Pasco County. Call the numbers included for information about meeting times and places. Want to be included or make changes in the listing? Write to Civic and Fraternal Groups Listings, 11321 U.S. 19, Port Richey 34668.

Unless otherwise noted, phone numbers are area code 727.

Beta Sigma Phi

- Alpha Alpha Iota; 372-7973.
- Laureate Gamma Epsilon; 697-1845.
- Laureate Zeta Nu Chapter; 862-5494.
- Omicron Kappa; 804-4010.
- Preceptor Delta Psi Chapter; 846-9960.
- Preceptor Eta Sigma Chapter; 376-3358.
- Preceptor Eta Zeta Chapter; 996-4236.
- Tau Delta Chapter; 973-4463.
- Xi Lambda Delta Chapter; 848-1045.

Business

- American Business Women's Association (Pasco East Chapter); (352) 567-7510.
- American Business Women's Association (Palm Chapter); 847-1286.
- Calusa Business and Professional Women's Club; 856-9595.
- Florida Society of Professional Accountants Inc. (Gateway Chapter); 845-8101.
- International Typographical Union of Florida's West Coast; 937-3499 or 863-6233.
- North Suncoast Association of Life Underwriters Inc.; 849-6585 or 847-2550.
- Pasco County Security Patrol Association; 845-5991 or 848-8457.
- Pasco Professional Referrals; 842-4476.
- Suncoast Advertising Federation; 856-6856.
- Upper Suncoast Chapter of the Florida Association of Independent Accountants; 847-6324.

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