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Inside Mighty Oaks Equine Learning Center, Rollag

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The work itself looks different for every horse. Training is approached slowly, with patience and empathy, allowing each animal to understand what is being asked and to respond without fear or confusion. Some horses are ridden bareback or under saddle, while others focus on groundwork, depending on their needs and comfort.

That same individualized approach carries into teaching. Students learn far more than riding. They are taught to clean tack, take vital signs, communicate with veterinarians, repair fencing, manage property, and respond to basic first aid situations. Each lesson, typically lasting close to an hour, is tailored to the individual, whether their goal is confidence in the saddle or simply comfort being around horses.

Many of the horses here arrived because they had nowhere else safe to go. Some were neglected. Some were misunderstood. Others were once accomplished horses that no longer fit the situations they were in. At Mighty Oaks, they are not passed along again.

"Horses aren't tools and they're not toys," Erickson said. "You can't just pick them up and put them down when it's convenient." Here, they stay.

That level of commitment comes with significant responsibility. Every dollar earned through lessons, camps, and events is reinvested directly into the horses' care, covering veterinary work, farrier visits, chiropractic and therapeutic services, feed, and equipment. On average, the cost to care for a single horse can reach approximately \$500 per month, a reality that underscores the depth of the commitment behind each animal.

Horses are not sold or cycled through, and they are not discarded when they age or change. They are kept, cared for, and known as individuals. Over time, the effects of that consistency become visible. Bodies fill out, tension softens, and curiosity returns. Many begin to



A wide-eyed young camper gently pets Piper at Mighty Oaks, where careful, positive exposure helps children feel safe, confident, and connected around horses.

approach again, choosing interaction rather than avoiding it.

That trust becomes the foundation for everything the barn offers. Students do not just learn to ride. They learn to care. They take vital signs, mix and soak feed, understand pasture management, and learn how to read the subtle language of a horse's body. They learn that small mistakes can have real consequences

and that responsibility comes before reward.

"If people don't know what they're doing, the one that suffers most is the horse," Erickson said. Lessons are built around communication rather than pressure. If a rider is not ready, that matters. If a horse is not comfortable, that matters too. "We base everything on consent," Erickson said.

That approach makes the barn accessible to people who might not feel comfortable elsewhere. Some arrive confident and eager. Others arrive timid or anxious. Some are children seeing a horse up close for the first time. Others are adults returning after years away.

Peggy Hicks remembers her first visit clearly. "I walked into the barn, and there was a horse on the other side of the gate, and I was shaking," she said.

She kept coming back despite the anxiety she had long been accustomed to. At first, she stayed at a distance, helping with small tasks, learning to observe. Over time, familiarity replaced fear. Today, she helps guide beginners, especially those who arrive feeling exactly as she once did. If a student spends an entire lesson simply standing beside a horse, that experience is still valued.

Part of what draws people to Mighty Oaks is not just what they learn, but how it feels to be there. Tall oaks frame the pasture, and a newly built arena creates space for a wide range of activities. Horses graze quietly, lifting their heads now and then to watch. There is no rush.

Some visitors choose to groom or lead a horse. Others ride. Many simply stand nearby, resting a hand along a warm neck, listening to steady breathing and the quiet sound of grass being pulled from the ground. Each horse carries its own personality, but most share one common trait: a fondness for biscuits.

"Horses are Divine Mirrors, and give back what they get," Erickson said. Horses respond without judgment. For people carrying stress, grief, or uncertainty, that presence can feel unfamiliar at first. Then it begins to settle in.

"You discover that you matter," Erickson said. "Not what others say, but what you feel inside and how you present yourself to the world."

That sense of welcome extends into the everyday life of the barn. From seasonal camps and birthday parties to riding lessons and youth internships, Mighty Oaks has become a place where families return again and again. Children spend hours riding, playing games, sharing meals, and forming friendships, often leaving tired, a little dusty, and already asking when they can come back.

Camps are designed to be both fun and immersive. Participants ride, help care for animals, play games, and build friendships, often leaving with a deeper understanding of both horses and themselves. A new offering, "A Day in the Life of a Horse Kid," will give participants the opportunity to be paired with a horse for an entire day, experiencing the full rhythm of care and connection that defines life at the barn.

The barn also embraces a sense of wonder and magic. One of its most beloved offerings is the unicorn photo experience, where horses are



Even in winter, the horses at Mighty Oaks remain curious and engaged, Mick and Echo step closer to investigate something new, including a camera in a visitor's hands.

carefully prepared and adorned with floral garlands and soft, shimmering details. Children step into the pasture and, for a moment, into something that feels almost otherworldly.

The horses stand patiently, steady and calm as small hands reach up to touch them and laughter carries across the field.

The unicorn photo shoots themselves are a collaboration with Soul Tree Photography Studio, AJ Photography, and Sara Jo Photography, creating an experience that blends thoughtful horsemanship with artistic storytelling. What appears whimsical on the surface is grounded in the same foundation as everything else at Mighty Oaks.

The horses are attentive, responsive, and deeply trusted, allowing each moment to unfold naturally and be preserved as something both magical and real, without ever compromising their comfort or care.

When the team looks at their herd, they still see what those horses once were. Show horses, endurance horses, ranch horses and mustangs. But what matters most now is that they have become family. That same spirit carries into larger gatherings like the barn's "Peace in the Pasture" events, where people come not to perform, but simply to be.

Visitors arrive as strangers and

leave a few hours later offering hugs. Some ride for the first time in years. Others stay on the ground, moving quietly from horse to horse, finding comfort simply in being close.

There are moments that unfold quietly. A pause. A breath. A hand resting against a horse. When the animal steps forward, steady and sure, emotion follows, not from fear, but from recognition.

For the women of Mighty Oaks, those moments are the reason the work continues. The chores do not stop. Horses still need to be fed. Fences need repair. Winters come and go. But the purpose remains steady.

Those interested in visiting Mighty Oaks or learning more about its programs can connect through the center's Facebook page. Angie Erickson is also available by text at 218-329-6984 during business hours from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.

In a world that often values speed and performance, Mighty Oaks offers something different. Here, horses are respected. People are met where they are.

And from that steady work, something meaningful continues to grow.

On this stretch of land near Rollag, both horses and humans are given the same opportunity.

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A summer trail ride winds through Mighty Oaks, where a range of offerings, from lessons and camps to guided experiences, gives visitors multiple ways to connect with the horses.