



# *It Takes a Village — and a Horse*

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## It Takes a Village — and a Horse

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When patients come to a cancer hospital, they are torn out of their element. Their entire life is upended, their schedule is interrupted, nothing is familiar. Patients often experience a profound loss of control, and transfer their trust to their physicians and nurses.

We at the Seidman Cancer Center talk often about “relationship-based nursing” and we take such personalized, intimate care very seriously. Our nurses constantly seek ways to relate with patients on a personal level: getting to know them and their families, their likes and dislikes, things that make them comfortable and relaxed, small things that might make a positive difference in their day and which will restore a sense of confidence in themselves, or remind them that their lives beyond the walls of our hospital are legitimate and have not disappeared.

Place yourself in the shoes of a young woman in her twenties, with a passionate love for horses. Can you feel the onset of summer—the eagerness to escape to the pasture in the early-morning hours before the heat settles in, to ride and be carefree, to feel your muscles work up against the muscles of these huge and beautiful animals? Then find yourself displaced, on the new turf of a hospital

bed, your mind riddled with thoughts about an ugly diagnosis.

This drastic change in life-circumstances happens to each and every one of our patients, and respect for the emotional difficulty informs the pride my colleagues and I take in working at Seidman Cancer Center.

During Interdisciplinary Rounds each morning, we discuss our patients’ plans of care, addressing not only medical interventions, but also mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of wellness and treatment. Given this model, it thus came as no surprise that while discussing a particular patient who loves horses, Diana Le, one of our music therapists, mentioned Petey, a miniature horse she had noticed visiting patients over at Rainbow Babies and Children’s Hospital. One conversation later with my colleagues and with the help of our Child-Life Specialist at Rainbow, I arranged for Petey to come visit our patient and work his healing magic.

When Petey arrived and we all walked down to the patient’s room and explained that she had a surprise visitor, watching her and her sister’s facial expressions as the horse walked through the door threw

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us all into fits of tears. Petey was well-versed with his purpose, putting his long face right next to the patient's face. Their instant bond was unmistakable, exploding the energy in the room.

The patient was overwhelmingly happy. Within a few minutes, as she conversed with Petey's owner and shared her experiences with own horses, her downcast expression of discouragement and sadness transformed to one of delight and confidence. She reminisced about caring for one of her horses that had had a long and difficult road to recovery from an accident. She shared how she tended to his wounds and loved him back to health after his injury. A ten-pound weight slipped off her shoulders that afternoon and she somehow regained a necessary sense of self—of feeling familiar and comfortable.

As a nurse and care coordinator, I am constantly encouraged to find that so many people like Petey's owners exist, with special talents and a willingness to take time out of their day to make a difference in a stranger's life. This patient is my daughter's age, and I've been telling her all along how she reminds me of my daughter. With painful clarity, I still remember 23 years ago, when my daughter at the age of three was

diagnosed with cancer. It was over the Christmas holidays that we received her diagnosis and she underwent emergent surgery, waking up afterwards with a row of thick staples holding her stomach together. As we put away glittering Christmas lights, she began what would be months of radiation and chemotherapy. It was the stuff of my worst nightmares.

But I also remember meeting a startling amount of people like Petey's owner—those who came out to spread cheer, extend themselves with the pure aim of making a difference in a child and family's day. And most significantly, I remember my daughter's nurses. They cared for my whole family, and one might even say they became my family. They treated my daughter with authentic passion and kindness and it's because of them that I became a nurse and continue to hold myself to the highest of standards in how I care for my own patients.

And that's why I feel so blessed to be a part of the University Hospitals Seidman Cancer Center's team of nurses. Their care, like Petey's care for that young woman, is familiar and comfortable—and so necessary to our working together to defeat this thing called cancer. 📌

*Petey is owned by Victory Gallop, a therapeutic riding facility founded by Gustely, veterinarian David Miller and his wife, Sue Miller, in 1995 in Bath Township. Never in a hurry, he is always willing to hang out and let his new friends stroke his soft face and listen while they share their story. He has a unique way of touching the lives of everyone he meets.*

*Petey has been a therapeutic horse since 1997. It takes about one hour to prepare Petey before he heads to the hospital. Petey must receive two to three baths before each visit. After his bath, each hoof is scrubbed, dried and then wrapped in order to keep his feet clean. His tail is then sprayed with a conditioner and it, too, is wrapped for the ride to the hospital. Once outside the hospital, each hoof is unwrapped and wiped out. His tail is unwrapped and a towel is used to rub down his whole body. The last steps are to clean his eyes and nose area and finally he receives a spritz of Listerine to help eliminate any bacteria. He bravely enters both hospitals through a revolving door and rides the elevator along with other visitors, nurses and doctors to each floor where he then begins making his visits. And yes, if you were wondering, Petey is even housebroken. Petey has learned to signal to his handler when he needs a break.*

*Excerpted from Petey the Pony: [www.victorygallop.org/petey.html](http://www.victorygallop.org/petey.html).*