As part of her occupational therapy level one fieldwork, Lizzie Gaudet worked with disabled children on horseback to help improve their motor control and self-esteem.

Lizzie Gaudet '21 has always connected with horses more than people. "I was that 'horse girl' growing up," the Husson Occupational Therapy student says with a chuckle.

When she was 12 or 13, Gaudet spent time at Riding To The Top Therapeutic Riding Center in Windham. "I went there for some help with anxiety and depression," Gaudet explains. "It helped me so much."

Gaudet could barely bridle her excitement when she found out Riding To The Top was her assignment for OT fieldwork. "My face just lit up when I heard about my placement," says Gaudet.
Jordan Butler ’21 was ecstatic when learning she too, would be spending time at Riding To The Top. The fourth year Occupational Therapy student grew up on a farm in Lee. “I started to learn how to ride when I was four years old,” Butler says.

She and her husband own two horses. “I wanted to do at least some of my field work in this area because my husband and I would love to get into therapeutic riding,” explains Butler. She even volunteered at a therapeutic riding session taught by Husson OT program instructor Christine Hubbard, OTD, MA to better prepare herself for Riding To The Top.

Since 1993, Riding To The Top has provided horse-centered therapeutic services to both children and adults with disabilities. “We serve about 250 clients on an annual basis,” explains Riding To The Top Executive Director Sarah Bronson, “everyone from people with severe physical and cognitive disabilities to veterans with PTSD and elderly people with memory issues.”

The 50-acre property is open year round with both indoor and outdoor riding arenas. There are 16 horses ranging from miniature to larger draft crosses. The center offers both mounted and carriage riding therapies.

Riding To The Top started working with Husson OT students about five years ago as part of its Level One fieldwork. “These experiences are typically 40 hours over the course of the semester,” explains Laurie Mouradian, ScD, ATR, OTR/L, who chairs the School of Occupational Therapy. “They allow our students exposure to different settings, environments, populations and approaches to working with people that an occupational therapist might work with. Having a Level One experience at Riding To The Top gives students an opportunity to work with real clients at an emerging practice that has tremendous potential to expand in the coming years.”

Husson OT students working at Riding To The Top learn about therapeutic riding as well as other modalities including hippotherapy. “Hippotherapy is used by occupational therapists, physical therapists and speech language pathologists to achieve functional, mobility or communication intervention goals,” explains Dr. Hubbard. “It differs from therapeutic riding as the focus is on the sensory and motor experience of being on horseback and how that can improve function, with little to no focus on learning how to ride the horse.”

Gaudet and Butler spent their spring break at the farm, working primarily with pediatric clients. They observed lessons the first two days and attended several training sessions. “The rest of the week we had the opportunity to work with different instructors and clients,” explains Butler. She and Gaudet were given numerous opportunities for experiential learning from setting up activities, to leading and sidewalkng the horses during lessons.

“It was just incredible to watch the mood of the clients light up when they came around the horses,” Gaudet says. “The horse would recognize the clients, they’d get so excited and hug the animals. It was a complete mood lifter.”

Gaudet recalls one exercise where clients held a wooden egg in a spoon while they were riding. “This helped work on their strength, balance and coordination,” she explains.

Gaudet’s decision to become an occupational therapist was a personal one after watching her mother deal with the challenges associated with a spinal cord injury as well as an uncle with Down Syndrome. “Being around them certainly made me more grateful to be an able-bodied person,” she said. “The experience also motivated me to help those with disabilities.”

Butler enjoys the mental health aspect of occupational therapy. She says her experiences at Riding To The Top opened her eyes to the opportunities associated with equines. “I now realize the benefits of therapeutic riding for all ages and many different diagnoses,” she says. “Horses are valuable animals that can change the lives of those around them.”

“Animal assisted therapy offers social, communication, sensory and spiritual opportunities that can help people to rehabilitate,” says Hubbard. “Horses offer the additional aspect of movement which can have a positive effect on an individual’s balance, ability to move, and sense of themselves.”

Bronson says the trust between horses and humans transcends any physical or emotional disability, making the relationship a bond sealed with trust. “It’s pretty rare for someone with a disability to not experience some sort of social isolation,” she explains. “Here at the farm, people are accepted. The entire family unit is embraced. They feel like they’re part of a safe community here and that’s something I am very proud of. I think that’s a vital part of what we do.”