

Making a Difference

By Ben Tennison

We hear about the bad in this world but not nearly enough about the good things people are doing for others. I know there are many doing good things out there, many more than we hear. I'm positive many of those doing good for those in need, doing for a neighbor or doing good for those in far away places have a heart that doesn't seek recognition. Let a fellow that buys ink in 55 gallon barrels find out about someone doing good and he'll write about it.

Tim and Marsha Mendenhall from Rocking M Miniatures of Leavenworth, Kansas are doing something good in our world. At a "Donkey Day of Knowledge", held at Rock NT Ranch owned by Neil Dicrisci and Tracy Billings of Long Lane, Missouri, the Mendenhall's met someone very special. While at the workshop for miniature donkey owners, breeders and for those just interested in miniature donkeys, they met 16-year-old Shelby Owens, the daughter of Julie and Jerry Owens of Long Lane, Missouri.

Shelby was diagnosed with cerebral palsy when she was 15 months old and has been in a wheel chair most of her life. Tim happened to be giving a demonstration on just how easy it is to teach a miniature donkey to pull a cart. Emily, Shelby's sister took instruction first by Marsha on how to harness and then Emily took to driving around the arena. Then it came Shelby's turn to take instruction and taking her turn at driving. A newspaper reporter from the Buffalo Reflex reported it like this, "From my view point behind the



Shelby Owens driving the cart pulled by miniature donkey, "Momma Rose" while Marsha and Tim Mendenhall walk with her at the Missouri State Fair in Sedalia, Missouri in August 2007. Photo courtesy of Abbie Photos

lens of the camera, this gave Shelby some sort of new freedom. She was used to the motion of her wheelchair but nothing like this. Her eyes just sparkled and that was all it took to grip the hearts of Tim and Marsha Mendenhall. Shelby's smile said it all, it was the expression of what was in her heart."

It didn't end there. Tim left with what he had witnessed in his heart and had plans rolling around in his head on how he could build a cart that Shelby could use by herself. Tim talked with Shelby's father to find out what Shelby was capable of by herself and what she might need in a cart. Tim used a boat seat and race car seat belts mounted on the cart allowing Shelby to use the armrest to help her sit up straight. The racing seat belts would give Shelby the security she needed to sit-up and drive in style. Tim went

as far as to make the special seating removable so sister Emily and Shelby could enjoy riding together when they wanted.

Tim hauled the special cart to Long Lane along with a miniature donkey by the name of "Momma Rose." Marsha harnessed Momma Rose and off to the open field they went, Marsha walking beside her and Tim and Jerry looking for any adjustments that needed to be made. Shelby's smile said it all again. Tim and Marsha Mendenhall had changed a life.

Tim is in the process of getting a patent for his custom donkey cart and they are looking for the right donkey that is gentle and trained enough to pull Shelby's cart. In the meantime sister Emily has been pulling Shelby around from time to time.

Shelby was asked to bring her

cart to the Missouri Sate Fair back in August for a driving demo and was presented a blue ribbon by the Missouri State Fair. Shelby also drove at the American Royal parade in Kansas City, Missouri back in September and the group she participated with, The Saddle Club Youth, took first place in Parade at the American Royal.

Tim and Marsha are presently conducting a driving program for our youth. They have a team of miniature donkeys hooked to a miniature covered wagon and encourage any and all kids to drive them. After their driving lesson the child is presented with a Certificate as a Student Driver by the

Mendenhall's. I know first hand how happy a child is to be able to drive the donkeys and walk away with that certificate. My four-year-old granddaughter came running to me during the Ozark Mountain Mule and Donkey Days in Ozark, Missouri and was busting at the buttons showing me her certificate and excitedly telling me about being able to drive the donkeys.

Tim said, "We are trying to preserve something that is dying, the art of driving. We're just planting a seed. Children and their parents aren't intimidated by the miniatures," says Tim, "and it's something

they'll never forget. Just maybe a few will get hooked and continue with miniatures or the mules."

The Mendenhall's are making a difference. You can see it in the smiles of children and parents alike. They are literally changing lives.

Below is a copy of the certificate that the children receive for driving

