

Saddle Up! effort strikes chord in Cagle's heart

Singer marvels at special bond between horses, children

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Country music artist Chris Cagle visits with clients of Saddle Up!, which is a therapeutic horseback riding program in Williamson County that serves children who have disabilities. /Submitted

Saddle Up!, which provides a horseback riding program for kids who have disabilities, has touched country music star Chris Cagle like no other nonprofit can.

The Williamson County-based program deals with two things closest to the recording artist's heart: children and horses.

Music, of course, is also close to his heart. And he'll soon be adding that component when he headlines a Feb. 12 concert called 'Chris Cagle *Unbridled: Celebrating 20 Years of Saddle Up!*'

Cagle has loved horses and riding since he first sat on the back of a horse when he was only 3. His grandfather was the foreman at a Louisiana dairy

farm and Cagle would often visit in the summer. The farm's old mare, Maude (named after the Bea Arthur television character), was a handful for the adults but was gentle with a young Cagle.

"That's when I began to realize they are more than just another animal," he said. "My guess is that she might have had someone take something to her before, but she knew that I was just an innocent boy."

These days, Cagle and his wife own what he calls a "boutique ranch" — small compared with the huge ranches that surround it — with four breeding mares in Oklahoma.

Cagle was recently reminded of the gentle nature

of horses when he lifted his 8-month-old daughter onto the back of his stallion while he held her. The horse sniffed his firstborn's feet and made a loving nickering sound.

"It's that amazing amount of communication you can have with a horse. They know more than we give them credit for," he said.

Visit brings tears

Cagle, while visiting Saddle Up!'s 3,800-square-foot facility, which has an indoor riding arena, is approached by a young rider who wants to show Cagle his iPod. They share a laugh and a high-five when Cagle sees several of his songs in the boy's playlist.

"Yay!" the rider exclaims, jumping up and down from the excitement of knowing that one of his favorite musicians would watch him take part in his favorite pastime.

Cagle smiles broadly as the youngster heads out for his riding lesson. But as soon as the young rider is gone, Cagle lowers his head and grows silent for a stretch. When he looks up again, tears begin to form in the corners of his eyes.

"Just to see what they go through every day . . ." Cagle says, his voice cracking before trailing off.

After a few minutes, he's able to put into words what he was trying to convey. The Saddle Up! riders, who persevere even with a multitude of physical and mental challenges and bond with the horses, give him a different perspective on life's difficulties.

"When you see a kid struggling with a disability and they are out there riding, all of a sudden, maybe that flat tire you had today isn't such a big deal," Cagle said.

The first of many

Cagle said he expects this first fundraising concert for Saddle Up! will not be his last. He said he imagines it moving to the farm, where attendees could possibly tour the facilities and meet some of

the staff, volunteers and clients.

Since Cagle has refused to take payment for his appearance and is working to have the concert's costs picked up by sponsors, it's possible that all the revenue from the 20-year anniversary celebration will go directly to financing the nonprofit's programs, said Cheryl Scutt, executive director of Saddle Up!

"We are just thrilled," she said. "This is one of the biggest events we've ever undertaken. Chris is wonderful to work with, and he's gone far above and beyond the call of duty."

Cagle has also encouraged his band to come out to Saddle Up!'s Old Hillsboro Road facility and volunteer their time doing whatever needs to be done.

Founded in 1990, Saddle Up! each week offers horseback riding lessons to 120 kids who have disabilities. It amounts to about 4,500 lessons a year. There are 300 active volunteers in the organization.

A songwriter and performer, Cagle's hits include "Chicks Dig It," "What a Beautiful Day" and "I Breathe In, I Breathe Out."

"These horses give the children legs and wings to dream," Cagle said. "My job is to do the most I can to support that."

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Concert is at TPAC

Chris Cagle Unbridled: Celebrating 20 Years of Saddle Up! is at 7:30 p.m. Feb. 12 in the Tennessee Performing Art Center's War Memorial Auditorium in Nashville. Tickets start at \$35. To purchase, visit www.tpac.org or call 615-782-4040.