



# Annual Report

## January 2026



### From the Free Rein Board Chair

It is time for reflection again. This will be my last column as Chair of the Board for Free Rein Center. I have had a chance to look back on some of my previous messages and I hope that I have been able to convey the privilege and honor I have felt to represent the Free Rein Center as Board Chair. I have spoken about the excitement I felt being part of an organization which cares so deeply about its clients, its staff (human and equine), and its volunteers. This truly is a family that comes together to make the magic of healing. I hope I have also been able to communicate the importance of our mission: “To serve the community by strengthening the spirits, minds, and bodies of children and adults through interaction with horses” and how the therapeutic equine experience benefits so many individuals with various needs.

Through the last three years, the Free Rein Center family has experienced great growth in new students, new school participation, new programming – the Little Hooves Touching Hearts and Horse Powered Reading Program – new volunteers and new staff, some of whom you will meet in this edition of Nickers. We have some new teaching materials and a new building going up that will serve as a classroom. We have been blessed during these past three years to have wonderful returning volunteers, students, and staff come back on campus.

Free Rein has also experienced its share of challenges. It has weathered a hurricane which impacted our students and their families, our staff, our horses, and the campus. Next there were the fires which burned dangerously close and necessitated possible evacuation planning. Lastly, and perhaps the saddest of all, was the loss of horses Free Rein Center has experienced over the last three years either by retirement or death due to age or illness. It happens, but no one is ever prepared emotionally for a partner who is loved so much to leave us.



But out of change comes good things. We have a stable of younger talented horses this Fall. It is an exciting time for students, volunteers, and staff. And as I leave the Board Chair position, I am excited to introduce John Colflesh as the new Board Chair of the Free Rein Center. Many of you know John as a horse walker volunteer. He has been on the Board of Directors for a couple of years and the Vice Chair this past year. So, if you see John on campus give him a “Congratulations.”

**Free Rein’s Mission** is to serve the community by strengthening the spirits, minds and bodies of children and adults through interaction with horses.

**Free Rein’s Vision** is to provide interactive horse-human experiences to an inclusive community which enrich life skills, promote personal well-being and build lasting relationships.

**Free Rein’s Values**  
We offer a positive experiential, collaborative environment that heals and cares for our community, participants and horses through mutual respect, positive atmosphere and personal growth.

## Change is Part of Life

Change is part of life, including here at Free Rein. We have certainly seen that here in 2025. I know I can speak for all of the board members by thanking Susan Kish for her service as Board Chair and I am thankful she will continue to serve on the board and will be available to us as a resource. I am honored to accept the challenge of stepping up as Chair. In this I will be supported by a great and dedicated Staff, Board Members, and cadre of Volunteers to carry on maintain and grow our programs. We will continue to nurture the relationships we have with individuals and sponsors that have so generously provided the financial backing that enables us to serve our clients.

One of the reasons I became a volunteer at Free

Rein in 2017 and later a board member, is the strong bond that I have experienced between horse and human. I saw that that connection was an integral part of what makes horse-assisted therapy work so well. This trust relationship that develops is similar to that between humans and dogs, but different. When mounted, the horse and rider become one, sharing work, pleasure, and challenges. Horses and riders learn by working together, “sending signals” to each other. When each begins to understand these, faith is built that the other will reward them by serving their needs and keeping them safe. This is what we see in the lessons we provide for our clients daily.

John Colflesh



### Thank you . . .

**Mary Stoehr** for your many years of dedication as a PATH Intl. Certified Riding Instructor at Free Rein. Since 2012, your commitment, compassion, and skill have made a lasting impact on our riders, horses, and community. You will be deeply missed, and we are so grateful for everything you’ve shared with us. We wish you all the best in your next journey, congratulations on your retirement!

### . . . and Welcome

**Zak Levin** joined the Free Rein family close to the end of 2025 as their Bookkeeper/Office Manager. He is currently enrolled in the accounting and finance program at Western Governance University where he plans to graduate by the end of 2026. Afterwards he plans to pursue a master’s degree to continue working towards his eventual goal of becoming a CPA. While Zak doesn't have the horse expertise the rest of the family has, he makes up for it with his financial know-how, and can-do attitude! Zak’s favorite part of working at Free Rein is his regularly scheduled time with Simba and Skid, the local barn cats, who shower him with love, affection, and few scratches here and there.



**Brianna Sullivan** joined Free Rein as Horse Care Coordinator in 2025. She started taking lessons at age 5, first in English pleasure, then eventing before finally settling in dressage. During college, she worked as an assistant to a Grand Prix dressage trainer and achieved her USDF bronze and silver medals with her own horse, Sven. After spending several years working in the biotech industry, she relocated to NC and returned to her passion of working with horses. Brianna enjoys getting to know each horse’s personality and making sure they are happy and ready for the program.

## Welcome to the Herd:

### Lord Nelson



Lord Nelson is an interesting horse and his story even more so. He was in training at a local barn and, after having him and working with him for a bit, his trainer noticed that he was much happier being on a lead line than ridden independently. That, coupled with his laid back personality, made him an

ideal candidate for our program. She contacted Brittany about him and everyone was super excited at the potential of having him since we had lost Pumpkin and Toby and could really use something of his size and stature. At first it sounded as though his owner was willing to donate him completely but, as it turned out, needed to make some money off of him but was willing to let him go at a far reduced rate than what she paid for him or what he would be worth if he was sold to an individual. She really wanted us to be able to get him and told us that when she had purchased him from the breeder it was because her son had stopped wanting to ride

and wasn't as interested in horses. As it turns out, her son is autistic and really bonded with Lord Nelson and that was the entire reason she had kept him. Everyone knew then that, if this worked out, we would end up with an amazing horse because being a mount for a person with autism is not something that can be easily trained into a horse and especially not one that is only 5 years old. While everyone was talking logistics of how to financially be able to pull this off, one of our volunteers graciously offered to step up to the plate and run his own fundraising campaign to help us raise the funds to purchase Lord Nelson. From this generosity, Karl's Mane Cause was born and quickly raised the money we needed. As of October, Lord Nelson officially became part of the Free Rein herd. Though he was originally trained Western Dressage, he has made it perfectly clear to us, as he did to others before coming here, that he is much happier meandering on a lead line carrying our students than he is being ridden. His calm demeanor and slow pace will also make him a fantastic horse for beginners who do not need leaders since he is more than happy to go at a snail's pace. His age was a little surprising to some but, after all the horses we had lost, we were excited to have a young horse to help build our herd back and give us a presence that would be a fixture for many years.

### Ranger



Well, we said we wanted younger horses and someone, somewhere, was listening. Right around the time we had finished raising the money for Lord Nelson, another of our volunteers mentioned she had a friend who knew someone with a horse who would be absolutely perfect for our program. This is great news because we had just pulled a horse from the program because she was not happy doing this type of work. Brittany started asking some questions and quickly found out that not only is this horse also young, 4 years old, and one that could help us build our herd over the next couple decades, he is also a Gypsy Vanner. What are the odds that we went from dreaming of one day having a Gypsy for the program to now having the possibility of having two and both of them being so young?! It felt like a dream to even have this opportunity. Brittany contacted his owner and asked a few general questions, most importantly his name because no one knew how to refer to him other

than "the other Gypsy". She found out his name was Ranger and his owner had purchased him with the intention to show him. Unfortunately, he was not able to tolerate the heat in South Carolina so she was not able to ride or train him as she had hoped. Her biggest concern was, of course, him going to a home where he would be loved and cared for and she knew he needed to go somewhere where the heat was not as prevalent. After speaking with Brittany and learning about our program, she was very excited for the possibility that he could come live

here and become a member of our herd. She was even willing to donate him under the condition that he appraised for the amount of money that she needed to be able to do a tax write off since she was not receiving any money for him. While the rest of us held our breath for 2 weeks, Brittany and Ranger's owner worked to find an appraiser and get him appraised quickly. After what seemed like forever, the news came through. The appraisal amount was what she needed and Ranger was officially going to be ours. He moved in at the end of October and has been the sweetest boy. Affectionately nicknamed "Snoop" because of all his braids to keep his mane clean and intact, he settled right in and showed us the work ethic that he has and it is rather impressive for such a young horse. Brianna, our barn manager, has ridden and worked with him quite a bit since she started and says he is just so willing and eager to please, making him super fun to work with and be around. We haven't used him in lessons just yet because we wanted to play with him a little and get him used to the facility and the hustle and bustle of daily life here but everyone is quite sure he will be a rockstar when he enters the program as a lesson horse.

## Lieutenant Dan



We don't know too much about Lieutenant Dan's history or even his true age. He came to us at the beginning of May as a package deal with Sarge when their previous owner needed to downsize her herd after the death of her husband.

Originally named HeHe, he was a very thin, withdrawn shell of a pony that was very wary of people. Not entirely sure what his role in the program was going to be, and quite honestly not caring because of the state he was in, Kara and Brittany (primarily Brittany) agreed to take him on. Once he got here, it was very obvious that he was very distrustful of people and did not want any interaction with them. He would run from us in the pasture and, even once haltered, would shy away if whoever had him moved too quickly. It was quickly surmised that he had possibly been an Amish horse because of his carriage of his body and certain things that made him feel comfortable, such as confined spaces that resembled stocks, but it also quickly became fairly evident that he probably hadn't had the nicest life with people who were kind to him.

He was terrified of fast movements and spray bottles but he was never mean about anything, he just wanted to get away and get back to his stall or his paddock where he felt safe. After consistent work, he is now a totally different pony. He is more confident with scary situations, he can be fly sprayed without too much issue, and he is confident enough in his stall to be close to the door instead of hiding in the back. The biggest change happened just this week when we witnessed him approach a volunteer in his paddock and ask for affection. Instead of turning away like he normally would, he stood and let her pet and love on him and take his blanket off. It was such a heartwarming moment to witness and, honestly, a tear jerker. Taking on Lieutenant Dan was not only a saving grace for him but also for Gus, one of our other ponies. When we lost Bert, Gus became very sick from missing his friend and didn't really bond with any of the other horses. Once the quarantine period had ended, we decided to integrate Sarge into the herd but leave Lieutenant Dan with Gus. Gus quickly bonded to him and it made a huge difference for the both of them. Gus blossomed again with his new found friendship and Lieutenant Dan learned that we weren't so bad after he got to see Gus want to be with us and come over to us whenever we were around. He is the testament that love, patience, and time can heal wounds and it is such a privilege to get to watch him flourish in his senior years.

## 2025 Programming Update

The year also presented significant challenges, most notably Hurricane Helene. During the storm, several team members remained on property with the equines and instructors. Although flooding left the property inaccessible for three days, damage was minimal. In response to the storm's impact on the surrounding community, Free Rein adjusted programming by delaying lessons and restructuring the session schedule. We extend heartfelt thanks to the volunteers who assisted with cleanup efforts and returned multiple times until normal operations could resume.

As demand continued to grow, Free Rein maintained its 10-week session structure of an initial six-week session followed by a four-week session, to serve more participants while maintaining program quality and safety.

The 2025 Spring Session further reflected Free Rein's growth and adaptability. Despite a one-week cancellation due to wildfires, the program successfully served 142 participants, supported by 4 PATH instructors, 12 equine instructors, and 80 volunteers. During the Fall sessions, Free Rein served 40 participants in Fall 1, which did not include school groups, and 60 participants in Fall 2, with approximately half of the participants coming from regular school groups. These sessions reflected both the ongoing demand for services and the program's flexibility in serving individuals and partner organizations. Participants included school groups, Transylvania Vocational Services, individual riders, and a special Big Brothers/Big Sisters event. This two-hour interactive experience allowed participants to engage in hands-on equine learning stations focused on horse anatomy, grooming, measuring, and safe leading techniques, concluding with a barn walk and treats for the horses.

Community outreach remained a cornerstone of Free Rein's mission. Little Hooves Touching Hearts, our miniature horse outreach program, completed six visits to care centers across Transylvania, Henderson, and Buncombe counties, as well as Transylvania Regional Hospital. With the loss of Phoebe, the mini-horse who helped launch the program, the addition of Ladybug (Dolly), Jolene, and Zoey, our Welsh pony, ensured continued growth and success. Ladybug and Jolene are currently training toward therapy horse certification, and Board Member and Program Chair Porsha Smith has earned certification as a Miniature Therapy Horse Handler, strengthening program leadership and sustainability.

Looking ahead, Free Rein is preparing to launch a new groundwork initiative, including the Horse Powered Reading program. Staff members Brittany McCathern and Kara McC Carson, along with Porsha Smith, have completed facilitator training for this research-based Equine Assisted Learning program. Designed to enhance reading skills, problem-solving, confidence, and school success, the program pairs horses as reading partners to foster motivation, connection, and experiential learning.

Through innovation, dedication, and strong community partnerships, Free Rein continues to broaden its impact, empowering individuals, strengthening community connections, and creating meaningful opportunities for growth and healing.

### 2025 Board of Directors

Susan Kish, *Board Chair*  
John Colflesh, *Vice Chair*  
Jim Garrett, *Treasurer*  
Connie Edmunds, *Secretary*  
Porsha Smith, *Program Chair*  
Carter Heyward, *Director Emeritus*

Andy Bullwinkel  
Ann Farash  
Caroline Wheeler  
Danielle Goulet  
Tamika Hunter

### Free Rein Staff

Zak Levin, *Office Manager*  
Brittany McCathern, *Program Director*  
Kara McC Carson,  
*Program Administrator/  
Volunteer Coordinator*  
Brianna Sullivan,  
*Horse Care Coordinator*  
Caydia Fryberg, *Horse Care  
Coordinator Assistant*  
Paisley Simpson, *Barn Assistant*  
Allie Shaw, *Barn Assistant*  
Toni Garrett, *Instructor*  
Mary Stoehr, *Instructor*

# The Little Hooves Touching Hearts Program – 2025

## Summary of Visits and Events

### Program Overview

During our nine months of operation, our two miniature therapy horses, Jolene and Ladybug, took part in an average of two visits each month.

### Summary of Visits

10 care center visits

1 hospital visit

1 event with Big Brothers and Little Sisters

1 visit to Broyhill Children’s Home

1 preschool visit

4 large event visits

Each visit fostered positive interactions, lots of smiles and joy for all participants.



In February of 2025, Brittany McCathern, Kara McCarson and Porsha Smith became certified facilitators for Horse Powered Reading® which focuses on the learning process for the individual and builds upon children’s natural curiosity and determination. HPR integrates social-emotional learning with academics; thus allowing students to see and experience reading with their entire mind, body and emotions by creating metaphors for the skills involved in reading. Students interact with horses from the ground, while using toys and props to identify obstacles and learn five critical reading skills – phonemic awareness, decoding, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension.



Starting January 2026, Free Rein will launch a pilot partnership with Rise and Shine Afterschool Program. Two students will join the HPR program weekly for four weeks, with goals set individually. Data will be gathered and provided to Rise and Shine. We look forward to launching this new program and seeing what the future brings as we continue to support our community.



**SAVE THE DATE**  
*The Mane Event*  
*Horses Helping Humans Heal*

May 8, 2026  
6-9PM

*Fundraising Gala Benefiting*  
*Free Rein Center for Therapeutic Riding and Education*

# PLANNED GIVING

## Bequests

These make up the majority of planned gifts. Anyone can make a bequest to a nonprofit through their will or estate plan. You can allocate a specific amount of money to give after you pass, such as a lump sum or a percentage of your total wealth, or you can choose to give the remainder of your estate to a nonprofit after all of the other bequests are paid. Because your gift doesn't go to the organization until after your lifetime, you can change your mind at any time, thus providing maximum flexibility.

## Charitable Gift Annuities

This is an agreement in which the donor gives a significant gift to a nonprofit, receives a tax deduction at the time of the gift, and then receives payments from the nonprofit during their lifetime. The nonprofit may invest the money and after the donor's death, the nonprofit can use the remaining funds.

## Donation of Stocks of Appreciated Assets

This is one of the most beneficial ways for giving, allowing you to receive favorable tax treatment. A donor who gives us a gift of common stock held longer than one year avoids capital gains taxation on the transfer, so the full value of the contribution goes to Free Rein.

## Donate Through an IRA

If you are age 72 or older (70 ½ if you reached 70 ½ before January 1, 2020) you may be interested in lowering your IRA withdrawal's income and taxes. Through an IRA Charitable Rollover, you can transfer up to \$100,000 a year directly from an IRA to a qualified 501(c)(3) nonprofit such as Free Rein. The transfer amount will not be included in your taxable income, and the transferred amount can count toward the required minimum distribution (RMD).

## Outright Gift of Cash or Check

A cash gift by check is one of the most common and easiest methods for making an outright charitable contribution. Besides a possible deduction on your tax return, a major benefit is seeing the immediate results of your generosity. When you make a cash gift, you are demonstrating a strong commitment to help support Free Rein's mission and vision and are contributing to its success. (Checks payable to Free Rein, Inc. may be mailed to P.O. Box 1325, Brevard, NC 28712)

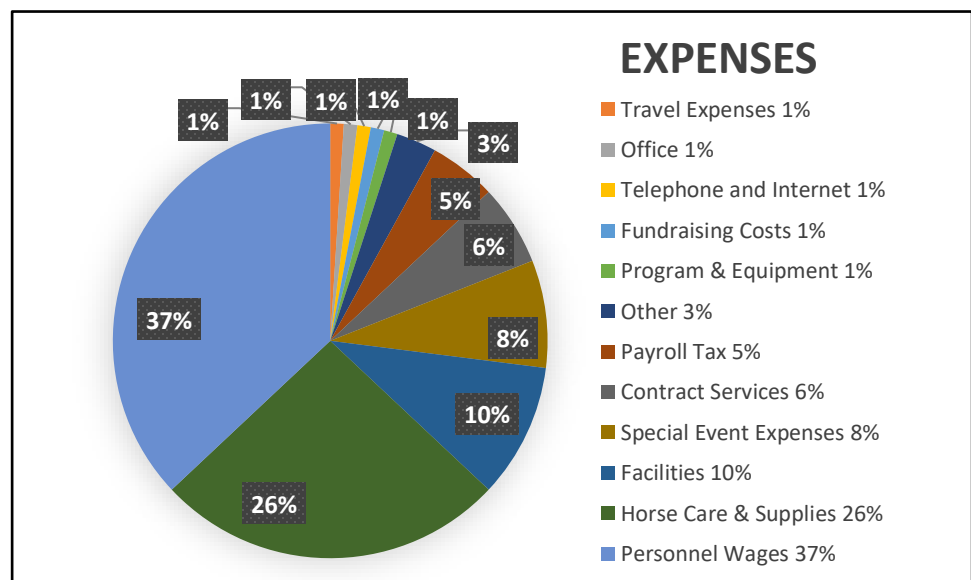
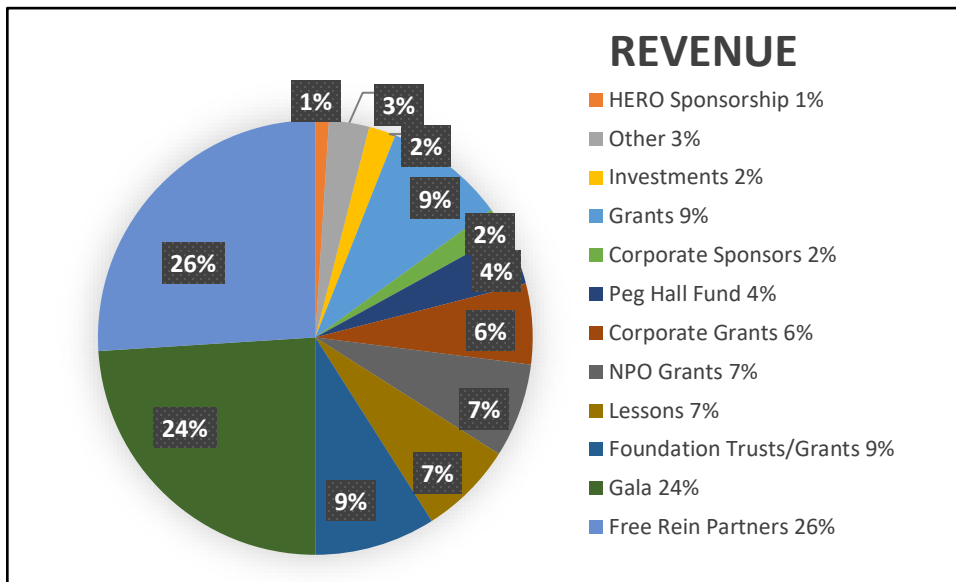
**Path Int'l (Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International) is a federally registered 501(c3) nonprofit, formed in 1969 to promote safety and optimal outcomes in equine-assisted activities and therapies for individuals with special needs. Free Rein has been a PATH Certified Center since 2001.**

## Financial Reports – 2025 ANNUAL BUDGET

Because of all our generous donors, sponsors, and grants, we have again had a successful year financially.

Our 'Mane Event' was a spectacular success with many compliments on the event itself and every auction item selling. The financial success was overwhelming! Free Rein Center thanks everyone for their attendance and their support. Our many loyal donors, sponsors, grants and specialized programming such as Little Hooves Touching Hearts have helped Free Rein continue to strive to keep costs in line. Thanks to all our volunteers, we have been able to run our programs with no price increases to our students. We are excited for 2026 and look forward to continuing to make the impossible – possible.

The accompanying charts show our 2025 income and expense distribution.



Thank you to all our sponsors and donors for supporting Free Rein.  
Without you we could not do the work of changing lives, one hoof beat at a time.

Platinum Level

TY HENDRIX  
INVESTMENT MANAGEMENT

Gold Level



Silver Level



Copper Level



## Our Valuable Donors

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