

Verne Upmier Arena Dedication

August 7, 2021

We are proud and happy to continue the growth and improvement of Miracles in Motion in spite of the challenges of the pandemic and the resulting turmoil it caused. It is our privilege to share with all of you - donors, volunteers, parents, riders, and others - the naming of the arena and the new addition to it in honor of Verne Upmier, recognizing the critical role Verne played in starting and supporting Miracles in Motion.

Verne Upmier is a local legend, a story in himself, and a storyteller. I have come to believe that half the people in a fifty-mile radius who have owned and ridden horses got their start at Upmier Stables. Verne Upmier lived and worked with horses and horse people all his life. Along the way he shared his love, knowledge, and respect for horses with others. Hundreds of children and adults have experienced horses and hay rides at Upmier Stable.

I am pretty sure stories *about* Verne and his *own* stories about his life and adventures with horses could fill volumes and I always hoped someone was recording at least part of them. I heard some of them in the time I knew him: driving cattle to the north side of Cedar Rapids to market and then sending his pony back home alone with a slap to the rump while he rode back in a truck, sharing campfires with Roy Rogers whenever Roy passed through this area, training techniques he used with horses, and on and on. But today we will focus on Verne's impact on Miracles in Motion.

In the 1980s Verne invited Stephanie Gilbertson to bring her daughter Andy, who was about six years old and autistic, to the stable to ride a pony. According to Stephanie, Verne thought every kid should be on a pony. The informal rides led to regular rides, and then the Gilbertsons purchased their own pony. As people around the stable watched Andy riding, they began thinking about other children with special needs who might benefit from riding. Therapeutic riding dates back several centuries and it became more organized in Europe in the 1950s, but no local program existed at the time Andy was riding at Verne's stable.

One horsewoman who grew up riding a pony at Upmier Stables, Sandy Greear, took the idea of starting a local program a step further and established Miracles in Motion as a nonprofit organization in 1988. She convinced her employer, Quaker Oats, to provide a startup grant and she became the first instructor, pulling in others to help get the program off the ground.

As Miracles took off and more horses and a facility were needed, Verne became even more involved. At the 20th anniversary of Miracles Stephanie Gilbertson shared another memory: “All the horses we borrowed were picked or blessed by Verne, which was a good way to go. It was really magical.” Verne would mention an appropriate horse and the Miracles volunteers would call the owner to see if they could borrow it. They borrowed Verne’s trailer and tack, and at first used the outdoor area at Cedar Rapids Horseman’s Club for classes (Verne was a member). In 1989 classes were moved to Verne’s indoor and outdoor arenas.

As the program grew, Miracles “borrowed” other arena facilities in Ely, Solon, and North Liberty, but the two horses owned by Miracles, Buck and Leo, and many of the other horses we used were still boarded at Upmier Stables. Our tack and equipment was also housed in a shed at Upmier’s.

Verne was a member of the Board of Directors from 1988 until he felt he needed to retire, at which time he was awarded emeritus status on the board. Operating on a shoestring, Board meetings often centered around finances. Time and again, Verne waived the boarding fees for the two horses Miracles owned and he continued to recommend horses we could borrow or lease. For several years a major fundraiser for Miracles, the annual Ride-a-thon, was held at Upmier Stables. Riders came to Upmier Stables to ride the surrounding trails, sent off by our own riders. The day included demonstration rides by Miracles students in the outdoor arena and hayrides on the property given by Verne.

For Miracles in Motion, in horseman’s terms, Verne was the foundation stock. Without his quiet and constant support it is unlikely the fledgling program would have survived to grow into the program it is today. Starting with six riders in 1988 and 35 riders by 1992, we jumped to 100 in 1994 after acquiring our own property. Having our own facility contributed to future growth because grants and donations could be put into permanent structures that enhanced the program, but it was Verne’s unselfish sharing in the early days that sustained Miracles in Motion through the lean years and allowed us to establish the premier program that has served hundreds of children, teens, and adults since Andy took her first ride at Upmier Stables.

From all the riders, the parents and families, the volunteers, and the staff at Miracles in Motion: Thank you, Verne Upmier, from the bottom of our hearts for sharing your love and enjoyment of horses with all of us. Designating this arena as the Upmier Arena is a visible tribute to your contributions to Miracles in Motion.