

# 1975 Accident Led Randy Johnson Into Ministry And Reality Ranch

By SUE CARPENTER

For The Herald-Advocate

Randy Johnson used to make a living on ranches. He was a cowboy who liked to rodeo and break horses. In 1975 at the age of 21, he dove into a lake and hit his head on the bottom. He has been a quadriplegic ever since, with some movement in his hands and arms.

After Johnson broke his neck, he felt a special calling to the ministry. Reality Ministries is a result of that. He became an ordained minister in 1982, is a licensed pastoral counselor and has a bachelor's in counseling psychology. He's served in several capacities of youth work, counseled for drug and alcohol recovery, and served as chaplain for the Florida High School Rodeo Association, the Florida Jr. Rodeo Association, ranch rodeos, Peewee Rodeos, at bull ridings, barrel races, ropings, trail rides, cowboy camp meetings and wherever a door is open.

Johnson still rides Nugget, a 23-year-old American quarter-horse and enjoys the freedom to go places. He can feel the movement beneath him and enjoys the serenity as he goes through woods and creeks. He even competes in team sorting, where cattle are separated according to numbers, even though he's strapped onto the saddle.

Since 1998 and the creation of Reality Ranch, the physically and emotionally handicapped have enjoyed riding there weekly. It stimulates muscles, confidence and self-esteem. After sitting in a wheelchair, their limbs lack mobility. The horse moves under them and causes blood to circulate and is referred to as hippo therapy.

One must overcome fear when exchanging a wheelchair for the formidable size of a horse. It's not just a pony ride. Their dexterity, thinking and cognitive reasoning is stimulated when games are played, whether placing rings on poles, or colored ribbons on a fence. Although most participants can't saddle up on their own,

the horse becomes their friend. An amazing thing happens. They step out of their disability and give love to another living being, whether it is brushing the horse or talking to him.

There is no charge or age limitation for this Thursday adventure, and volunteers and a certified riding instructor are present to assist. Dependent upon donations, Kiwanis sponsors this therapeutic riding for the disabled.

The Arcadia Girls Academy is a 15-month program for girls age 12 to 17. They're emotionally troubled, with control problems and at-risk behavior, like truancy, drugs or are runaways. Part of their probation involves Reality Ranch. It is not a residence program, but a weekly visit for 20 of them on Thursdays.

"The horses are a breakthrough for them," Johnson said. "At first they don't want anything to do with the stinking animals, but they soon become leaders and side walkers for the disabled participants." Some even become best friends. Work is also required for these girls, cleaning the barns and saddles, and maintaining the horses. And there is always a prayer before activities start.

Horse camps, church groups, Boy and Girl Scouts and other groups use Reality Ranch. A bunkhouse holds 16, or larger groups can camp out and pitch their tents.

In addition to all these activities, Johnson's Cowboy Church is open to anyone every Sunday at 11 a.m. Johnson insists it is more of a mission, and he tries to plug people into churches with youth fellowships. However, some of the people who remain in horse activities choose his Cowboy Church for all time. Held under a pole barn in an open-air setting, it is casual style, with locally provided live music.

From September through March a youth rodeo series is held for kids as young as parents will allow through the age of 18. It starts at 10 a.m. on a Saturday. There is no admission

fee, but concessions are available. There's calf roping, team roping, barrel racing, pole bending (where 6 poles are placed in the arena and the rider runs the horse through, weaving so as not to knock any down) and goat tying. Usually through by 3:30 p.m., last month there were 200 entrants. At 7 p.m. there's mutton busting, sheep riding, steer riding, calf riding, and bull riding for the younger cowboys. There are monthly prizes and at the awards banquet at Hardee Civic Center in May. Buckles and saddles are given for top winners.

Reality Ranch hosts a statewide competition of the All-Florida Jr. Rodeo Association for ages 6-14 on March 15-16.

On Sundays the fun starts at 2 p.m. People are asked to bring a potluck and to share dinner in the barn. "There is time for others to attend their own church and still get their horse and come over," Johnson said. "We play small competitive games in the arena, enjoy our horses and have good fellowship."

The first weekend in December Reality Ranch hosts a bull riding school for three days with people attending from great distances, even other countries. Instructor Lyle Sankey is a national finals bull riding qualifier. For more information go to [www.sankey-rodeoschool.com](http://www.sankey-rodeoschool.com). To donate, volunteer, or be involved with Reality Ranch, go to [www.realityranch.org](http://www.realityranch.org) or call Randy at 863-735-8600. Reality Ranch is located 2.5 miles east of 7450 Springs on Hwy. 66.

A Cowboy's Ten Commandments

- 1.) Just one God
- 2.) Honor yer Ma and Pa
- 3.) No telling tales or gossipin'
- 4.) Git yerself to a Sunday meeting
- 5.) Put nothing before God
- 6.) No foolin around with another fellow's girl
- 7.) No killin'
- 8.) Watch yer mouth
- 9.) Don't take what ain't yers
- 10.) Don't be hankerin for yer buddy's stuff



COURTESY PHOTOS

**Rev. Randy Johnson at Reality Ranch starts the day with a prayerp.**



**Girls get advice from Randy Johnson on grooming horse named Skeeter.**

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