



Rascal Rodeo lets people with disabilities ride bulls or unicorns made from barrels. PHOTOS COURTESY OF RASCAL RODEO

Giddy Up and Ride

Rascal Rodeo gives the reins to those with disabilities

By Katelin Davidson

Cowboys are known for their toughness, bravery and love for rodeo. While the participants in the Rascal Rodeo are not professional cowboys, they are brave and strong, and their love for their rodeo is unmatched.

Rascal Rodeo is an opportunity for people with mental or physical disabilities to participate in a day of rodeo life. It gives participants a chance to bond with horses and even ride a “bull.”

The bulls in this rodeo are made from barrels, and they buck with the help of a volunteer. If participants are intimidated by the bull, they can always ride a unicorn instead.

Participants rotate through stations, including cow milking, stick horse barrel racing, calf roping and horse rides. The stations are available to participants to complete as desired and at their own pace. The organizers ensure everyone feels safe and comfortable participating in an activity.

In September, the Rascal Rodeo came to Othello and joined with local sponsors to benefit individuals in the area. Members from the local Special Olympics Dream Team participated, as well as other community members with disabilities.

This one-of-a-kind event is made

possible by the nonprofit Rascal Rodeo organization. It was created by Ann-Erica Whitemarsh. It's a project of love more than a decade in the making.

Ann-Erica first had the idea to start a rodeo for people with disabilities when working on her senior project in high school. She had learned of an organization hosting similar events elsewhere in the United States, but there wasn't the same opportunity in the Pacific Northwest for those with disabilities.

She worked hard to create the event for her project, starting with four participants and 20 volunteers in 2001. The event was in Kennewick, and it garnered a lot of media attention. Ann-Erica received awards and recognition for her work.

“I knew I needed to do it again, but

I didn't know how!" she says. "So many people were very impressed that this was my project, and it had more impact and thoughtfulness to it than the other projects from my classmates."

Ann-Erica remembers standing up for students with disabilities while growing up, and she always believed they should have the same opportunities as their peers. She adds it must be in her DNA, as her father played a large role in creating the Tri-Cities Special Olympics track meet in the early '70s.

The idea remained in her head for years, but she moved forward with college and then joined the workforce. Ann-Erica said she was invited by a friend to host a similar event in Moses Lake at the high school rodeo state finals, and from that time forward, she knew it needed to be a permanent event.

Ann-Erica began filing paperwork to form a nonprofit organization and reached out to rodeo committees in the area. When the Rascal Rodeo organization officially began the following year in 2011, she had two rodeos registered.

From there, Rascal Rodeo nearly doubled each year. In 2020, Rascal Rodeo had 20 rodeos scheduled. But only one happened, as the remainder were canceled because of the pandemic.

This year, 17 rodeos are scheduled in Washington, Oregon and Idaho. The organization will also travel to Las Vegas to host an event at the National Finals Rodeo.

Summing up a Rascal Rodeo event in one word is easy for Ann-Erica: miraculous.

"We have had three participants speak their first words after riding horses at our event," she says.

One participant, a 30-year-old man with cerebral palsy, had never spoken a word in his life. His caregiver called the following day to say he had spoken one word: horse.

Ann-Erica explains it is easy to keep working hard to make these events possible when you get to see the development and joy of the participants.

"So many parents and caregivers reach out for more information, and then hesitate because they don't think their child can participate," Ann-Erica says. "But I tell them to bring them, and let's figure it out!"



Rascal Rodeo participants get to take home a belt buckle, donated from around the country.

Ann-Erica says many participants show up and are overwhelmed. But they seem to always be drawn to the horses, and eventually come over to meet their new four-legged friend.

Volunteers shower participants in love and encouragement, and volunteer cowboys make it possible for all participants to be on horseback. A cowboy helps hold participants steady as the horse is led around the arena.

In Othello, the drill team provided the horses to use at the event, and many also volunteered their time. Visiting rodeo royalty also came to help, and Ann-Erica jokes the queens are always popular, especially with the young men.

Rascal Rodeo is open to all ages, but most participants tend to be younger. Organizers hope each participant enjoys being a cowboy or cowgirl, even if only for the day.

The event has a lasting impact on all of those involved, including the coordinators, volunteers and participants. Many people return to join the event each year, and others have even changed their profession to work with children with disabilities after volunteering at the event.

The joy is contagious, and there are a lot of emotions involved with each Rascal Rodeo. The most important part is the celebration of abilities and celebrating the

new experiences along the way.

Ann-Erica says when she started this journey, she was unemployed and didn't have a car. She challenged herself and relied on others to help her make Rascal Rodeo a reality, and today she is overwhelmed with gratitude about its success.

Each event is made possible with donations from sponsors. Sponsorships make it possible for Ann-Erica to travel to all the locations, as well as provide specialty items for everyone to take home.

Volunteers each receive a T-shirt, and participants receive a shirt, cowboy hat, bandana and belt buckle. The belt buckles have been donated by individuals throughout the U.S., and participants get to pick the one they want to take home.

Ann-Erica hopes Rascal Rodeo will continue to grow and expand to more communities in the area. She also hopes it will inspire parents to bring their kids to the event and see the lasting impact it can have on their children living with disabilities.

"Volunteers don't need horse or rodeo experience. They just need to have a heart. And we all have one of those!" Ann-Erica says. ■

Information about Rascal Rodeo is available at www.rascalrodeo.org. Donations can be made through the website, and volunteers and participants can also register there.