



# Reflections...

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## Full Circle

by Judy Horton

My husband Jerry, our daughter Kelly (then seven) and I moved out to the land that is now Down Home Ranch on September 11, 1991. There was nothing out here but a little mobile home we'd bought, but we were dreaming big of a place where our daughter, who has Down syndrome, could grow up and take her place with other young people with handicaps in a joyful community where she'd be valued and loved.

We shared our mesquite-infested acreage with about 40 cows that lay about the yard chewing their cuds, stirring only long enough to browse a bit and create mountains of cow pies for me to dodge through that year's unceasing rain as I ran from the car to the house—trying to avoid the armies of fire ants.

The one smart thing we'd done in preparing for this great adventure was to burn our ships behind us. Thus it quickly developed that—no matter how intense the discouragement—it was easier to keep on keeping on rather than to go back and try to pick up the threads of our former lives.

We'd taken on a \$300,000 mortgage to buy the land for Down Home Ranch, and we figured (rightly) that foundations wouldn't want to give us money for construction until the land was owned free and clear. But we wanted to be of service, to start a program to serve our target population. What to do?

The fact that we had no money, buildings, staff, or equipment did pose something of an obstacle, but during a board meeting early in 1995 Fr. Joe Sheldon said in his inimitable voice: "We've got to get some programs going." That motivated us even more and that evening Jerry and I were knocking ideas about when I suggested a camp—inviting a few special needs kids to come and spend a week with us. What the heck. Let's try it, we thought.

I approached the National Guard guys in Taylor for cots and tents, and they were so enthusiastic they tried to throw a humongous field kitchen into the bargain as well. (If I'd known then what I know now I'd have taken it.)

Friends Mickey and Gay signed on to help out, and we sent out a mailing informing everyone of the first ever *Ranch Camp*—open to campers with mental handicaps from ages 11 and up. In addition to campers, we were also looking for "buddies," non-handicapped young people to match up with the campers and help them during activities and with their daily needs.

Seven kids signed up to be campers at the teen camp. Mickey and Gay supplied a few buddies themselves, along with some from other local home-schooling families. One very special buddy was Rebecca (Becca) Smith, then a cute, gangly 13-year-old with braces, who became Kelly's buddy.

Kelly adored Becca and eagerly spent every hour of the day with her. It was hot as only Texas can be that summer, and Jerry, Gay, Mickey, and I had to come up with everything from scratch: the activities, the food, the rules, the rewards. It almost killed us, but it worked.

We drove them into Taylor to swim. A neighbor let us fish off the dock on his stock pond. We had dances and races and nature hikes. I pressed everybody I knew into service to do crafts, drama, and other activities. Jeff played the banjo, me the guitar. We dressed up, acted goofy and had a big party on Thursday night.

All in all it was an incredible time, and if you didn't know better you might have thought we actually knew what we were doing. Plus, it was obvious that our young buddies had also been touched deeply by their gift of service.

Becca came the next year, too, but after that we saw her only infrequently, although Kelly continued to show off her camp scrapbook and pictures of her buddy Becca to anyone who showed an interest.



Becca and Kelly, Ranch Camp, 1995



The girls of Martha House today: Rebekah, Becca, Kelly & Jena

Time went by, and one day I was startled to receive a request for a recommendation for Becca to attend Texas A&M. I couldn't believe five years had passed already, but sure enough, Becca was ready to become a college student specializing in...special education and...writing her entrance essay on *helping out at Ranch Camp* and what it had meant to her! I was thrilled to know what an impression camp and our little munchkin had made on Becca.

Four more years zipped by, and before we knew it, Becca was graduating from A&M. Then, another great surprise and gift to the Ranch, Becca wanted to be a Resident Assistant at Down Home Ranch—becoming a house-mom for her first job out of college. And, guess who lives in that house with her now? Miss Kelly Horton, of course, living away from Mom and Dad for the first time in *her* life, and thrilled to get her big buddy back!

And now the saga has come full circle. Becca reigns with firmness, humor, patience and creativity over Martha House, home to Kelly, Jena, and Rebekah.

They're a dynamic bunch, whether planning a Girls'-Night-In or plotting to defend the Martha House title as reigning victors of the Annual Swim Fest Competition. (Since Aggies and Aggie sympathizers were instrumental in Martha House having won it, we suspect they have a near unbeatable edge.)

Each afternoon the girls of Martha House can be seen power-walking their way around the Village Circle with Becca leading the way. For Jerry and me it is the most joyful sight imaginable, worth more than all the years, hard work, and uncertainty we've endured in building the Ranch. We see before us our dream come true, our girl at home in a community built for her, joined by other young people whose moms and dads wanted no less for them.

Becca's gift has proven priceless to Down Home Ranch, and so has Kelly's gift to Becca. During the week of *Ranch Camp*, each began to see with new eyes. Up until then, one had looked upon a world filled with limitless possibility, and one upon a world of impossible limits. But by grace, a new vision appeared that gave each entrance into the world of the other, to know, and to be known.

Which is what we'd longed for all along.

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Down Home Ranch is a working farm and ranch for people with special needs and those who choose to live and work beside them. For more information, go to [www.downhomeranch.org](http://www.downhomeranch.org), E-mail us at [info@downhomeranch.org](mailto:info@downhomeranch.org) or call 888-926-2253

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