

Back in the saddle

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MOUNT VERNON — Among the winding trails and trotting horses at Paradise in the Sky Youth Motivational Services, Inc., Nicole has been a regular rider for the past few months with a smile as long as the stretch of trail itself. She carefully mounted the horse that escorted her through the acres of serene trail.

Riding since she was 9 years old, Nicole hasn't let her cerebral palsy deter her from any saddle or stirrup. She mounted the horse with all the excitement and enthusiasm of someone riding for the first time.

Despite having rods in her back to support her spine, and a shunt in her skull, which requires a snug helmet while riding, Nicole has been able to mount the horse and ride in the saddle with confidence, with the help of a ladder and the encouragement of the Paradise in the Sky owners and staff.

When Nicole was riding, she was in her element and she showed a whole new side to her personality.

"When you put her on a horse, she can go anywhere," said Paula Kyle Stephens, co-founder and vice president of Paradise in the Sky.

"It's a lot better than walking myself," Nicole said. "... I love riding horses."



Joshua Morrison/News
Nicole sits high and proud on Kate preparing for a recent trail ride at Paradise in the Sky Youth Motivational Services Inc. In a week, Nicole will be able to ride her own horse at Paradise when Dakota is moved to the farm.

On Thursday, Nicole rode Kate, a friendly and mellow horse that used to perform in "Tecumseh" in Chillicothe. Kate is now retired and is a part of the Paradise in the Sky family. As much as Nicole enjoys her rides at Paradise, they are about to become even more thrilling.

Nicole's horse, Dakota, a Morgan, Appaloosa and Quarter-Horse mix, will soon be walking the trails with his more than 6-foot bulk of heroic

proportions. The 21-year-old horse has been in Nicole's life since she was 9 years old and now she will be able to ride him whenever she visits Paradise in the Sky.

"Since she's known that he's coming out here, she's gotten more excited, and she's more excited each time I come and get her," Stephens said.

"[Dakota's] a gentle giant," Stephens said.

Nicole will reconnect with Dakota on April 8.