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Allie Middleton and Shelby Miller, both 15, work on building a sensory trail Saturday morning at Healing Reins, an organization aimed at helping children and adults who have autism, multiple sclerosis and other sensory disorders. The sensory trail will help riders learn to balance while also challenging their senses.

High schoolers build trail to stimulate the senses

Trail at Healing Reins will serve people with disabilities

By [Christopher Stollar](#) / *The Bulletin*

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As rain began to fall on the muddy horseback trail, Ryan O'Hollaren ran a cable through wooden posts.

The Summit High School junior worked Saturday morning with seven other students to build a sensory trail at Healing Reins, a local organization that uses horseback riding to help children and adults who have autism, multiple sclerosis and other sensory disorders.

About 75 people ride at Healing Reins every week, program director Penny Campbell said. Right now, they have no such outdoor trail course. But thanks to the help of up to a dozen Summit High School students who have been working on the project, next month the riders will take their horses on a "sensory trail." Built of wood, cables and screws, the trail will have 10 stations where children and adults can play games and ride through obstacles that will engage their senses.

"It's just so original," O'Hollaren said. "We do community projects, but when you do something that affects a person directly, it's pretty cool and unique."

The Healing Reins sensory trail will help riders learn to balance on horseback while at the same time enhancing their sight, hearing and touch, Campbell said. For some people with disabilities, balance and integrating the senses does not develop as efficiently as it should. They can become overwhelmed with an overload of sensations.

To help such children and adults hone and deal with their senses, an instructor will lead them on horseback through a winding, quarter-mile trail that will challenge them, especially with hand-eye coordination.

The stations will range in difficulty.

At the station O'Hollaren was building, for example, riders will be led on their horses through several feet of foam noodles dangling from overhead cables.

The station will teach riders how to balance themselves, move through the noodles while remaining on the horse and not become overwhelmed by the foam enveloping them.

At a nearby station Saturday, Summit senior Eric Smejkal dug a shovel into the mud, building a mini-boardwalk that riders must learn how to cross. That station will also teach riders balance and how to deal with inclines and declines.

One of the most complicated stations will have a row of hanging chimes that riders can strike while on horseback in specific order to play songs like "Mary Had a Little Lamb," Summit biology teacher Mark McGarigal said. That station will teach people hand-eye coordination and how to listen for different musical tones, training their ears.

McGarigal has been leading about a dozen students in the trail project who are part of Roots & Shoots, a youth program that McGarigal said seeks to make positive changes for animals, communities and the environment.

Roots & Shoots is part of the larger Jane Goodall Institute, a global nonprofit that empowers people to make a difference for all living things, according to its Web site.

McGarigal said the sensory trail met the mission statement of both the institute and Roots & Shoots. He praised his students for coming out to work - in spite of the rain Saturday. The students will spend up to 25 hours working on the trail to get it ready.

"Most of the kids out here are not here because of a requirement, but because they want to make a difference in the world," McGarigal said. "They don't want to sit around and talk about what's wrong with the world. They want to do something about it."

That's partly why Morgan Hostetler came.

"I love this," the 14-year-old said. "It's a great idea."

The sensory trail should be completed by the end of next month, when Campbell's riders will get their first taste of a trail built just for them.

"This gives them the five senses," she said. "And in a fun way."

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