



Horses carrying disabled riders will ride under this trellis where Mercy Health System employees wind flowers on trellis.

Fastening flowers to a trellis. Arranging flowers in flower pots. Pulling weeds and pouring mulch. Sound like a day in the garden? It certainly was for volunteers from Mercy Health System and Swing-N-Slide. Both companies participated in United Way of North Rock County's Celebration of Caring – a day where employees from various companies volunteer to do projects for non-profit agencies. These particular volunteers were building a sensory horseback riding trail at S.M.I.L.E.S.

S.M.I.L.E.S., a program that United Way of North Rock County invests in, provides therapeutic horseback riding for those who are mentally or physically disabled. The volunteers set to work on a task that had been on S.M.I.L.E.S. "things to do" list for a long time. "The volunteer labor is awesome. This just makes it happen," said Sherry Monty, co-director of S.M.I.L.E.S.

Five people from Swing-N-Slide freely volunteered to help. One of them, Karen Smale, said, "It always makes you feel good to volunteer. We're hoping we can encourage more participation in future years."

Picture what the rider will experience – the horse clomping over a wood bridge, the smell of cedar mulch, the "crunch, crunch" of the horse hooves on gravel, the feel and sight of colorful butterflies on a fir tree.

Jean Firm, S.M.I.L.E.S. co-director, said, "The sensory trail is for people with sensory deficits. Their body is craving input. They have a hard time learning when they crave input. On the sensory trail, we bombard their senses with things to see, hear, touch and smell. Their system is saturated so they're calmed; their sense are satisfied. So then their mind is open to learning."



Swing-N-Slide employees clear grass by the new sensory trail.

Sherry Monty, co-director of SMILES, added, "This sensory trail is a new programming opportunity for those with sensory deficits. Instructors can build this activity into their traditional lesson plan."

Mercy Health System provided six volunteers. Shannon Dunphy-Alexander enjoyed this change of pace from the usual work day. "I feel it's good for the community, giving back - spending time outside the office, benefiting others."

Mercy Health System and Swing-N-Slide employees enjoyed working in the sunshine - gaining a tan, muscles from lifting bags of mulch and stones and a sense of satisfaction that they helped others.

Companies can call United Way of North Rock County's Volunteer Network to arrange a Celebration of Caring event anytime during the year. Some companies like to set regular volunteer days throughout the year. Companies can decide based on their schedule, skills and interests. Call Volunteer Network at 757-3058 or go to www.uwnrc.org; click on the "Volunteer Opportunities" tab to sign up to receive volunteer options via email.