

# Special program for disabled benefits all involved

## ■ Riding program assists children and adults physically and psychologically

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They may have trouble communicating in most situations, but there is one place where they are never misunderstood. Riding high in the saddle, both children and adults with disabilities are able to communicate with their horses in a way they often can't with other people.

Through the equestrian program for disabled people, children and adults have the chance to learn to ride horses, reaping the benefits not only of physical improvements, but of self-confidence and independence. Suffering from a variety of disabilities, such as deafness, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome and mental retardation, the program allows its participants to move and act in a way they can't on their own.

The riding program, located at the Carousel Riding Academy in Tottenville, is funded by the Beacon program on the South Shore. Organized through the Police Athletic League (PAL) and the Special Olympics, the program welcomes volunteers from all the stables across Staten Island.

Suzanne Grande, director of Carousel Riding Academy, marvels at the swift connections made between the disabled riders and their mounts, remarking that they appeared to be able to connect with the horses quicker than their able-bodied peers.

"I don't know if it's because they (the horses) sense the innocence in the children, or if it's something else, but their connection is made so much easier with the animals," she said.

Although the horses and ponies used in the program might seem frightening to some children, and even many adults, those who participate in the program approach the animals with no trepidation, eagerly clambering into the saddle, and reaching for the reigns. According to Ms. Grande, they learn to think of the animals as extensions of their own bodies and demonstrate remarkable comfort while handling the horses and ponies.

Adults and children of all sizes and abilities participate in the program, which teaches them not only how to ride, but how to care for the horses. Before riding, they first groom the horse, currying and brushing its coat. They also learn about tacking, which includes saddling the horse to be ridden.

When they finally climb on the saddle to ride, they are supervised by three volunteers, one to lead the horse around the track, and one on each side of the horse to support and encourage the rider as he or she learns to handle the horse.

Although such programs have existed in other parts of the country for years, this is the first time it has been offered on Staten Island. Terry Russo, whose son, Alan, participates in the program, has been working for years to build an equestrian program for disabled individuals, according to Ms. Grande.

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Terry Russo  
Alan Russo