

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.

7:45 PM
Terry Russo
Alan Russo

When the Beacon program received a significant increase in funding, the equestrian program was finally able to become a reality on Staten Island. The program began this summer, and although it will not operate during the winter months, it is scheduled to reopen in the spring.

"It's a very successful program," said Joseph Loughran, program director with PAL. "There's absolutely no fear on the part of the kids, it's amazing. It's terrific for non-ambulatory kids especially because it gives them a sense of independence and achievement. They do it better than I could myself."

The benefits of the program vary according to the individual. For some, it offers the chance to move freely, without the aid of a walker or a wheelchair. It can also strengthen leg and back muscles, which are used to sit up straight and hold on to the horse. For others, it is simply the benefit of increased self-confidence and focused attention that carries over into other activities.

Future plans for the program include the purchase of special high-back saddles so those without trunk control can still fully experience the exercise. According to

Ms. Grande, the participants are allowed to progress according to their abilities. As they become more accustomed to the horses and increase their handling ability, they are allowed to move on to more sophisticated exercises.

Jessica Mucciariello, 9, of Castleton Corners, who has cerebral palsy and can't walk without the use of a walker, talked excitedly about her hopes to one day be able to jump the horses over obstacles.

Pointing to her favorite mount, a gray and white pony named Apache, she talked about how much fun she had when she was riding, and even caring for the horse. "It's more fun than physical therapy," she said, as her mother noted they changed Jessica's physical therapy schedule so she could participate in the program.

"It's a good opportunity for the kids, this isn't a normal thing you would think of them being able to do," said Jessica's mother, Irene Mucciariello. "They also let her younger brother ride, so it doesn't become something divided into her activity or his. It makes it a family thing."

Although most of the children and adults who participate in the program are beginners, there is one member of the group with previous experience that is already at the competition level. Ms. Russo's son, Alan Russo, 10, has competed in horse shows on Staten Island, and most recently competed against approximately 40 adults in the Special Olympics games in Utica.

"He's always loved horses," Ms. Russo said of her son. One of four boys she has adopted with Down Syndrome, Alan has shown the

strongest interest in riding and already has won several ribbons in different competitions throughout the state.

"He has fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) and Down syndrome, and being on the horses calms him down and gets him focused," she said. Because most of Alan's problems are behavioral, as a result of the FAS, Mrs. Russo said having riding lessons to look forward to provides an incentive for Alan to behave properly.

"He has a discipline problem and this serves as a reward. It carries over into school, too. He knows he has to behave or he won't be able to ride," she said.

Recently Alan competed in three events in the Special Olympics in Utica and earned two medals for his efforts. He collected a silver medal for equitation (horsemanship), which judges the riders on how well they handle their horses and maintain composure in the saddle.

He also won a bronze medal in the trail class, which takes riders through an obstacle course and judges them according to their ability to maneuver the animal.

"He did it perfectly," said Ms. Grande, who also serves as Alan's trainer. "He did it as well as anyone else could have done it. I'm very proud of him."

Alan, who began riding lessons last year, snuck a few carrots to the horses when he was done riding, rubbing their noses and offering a few word of encouragement while they chewed the treat. He spoke about his abilities as a horseman, echoing advice from his riding instructor that it was very important to look forward when riding because otherwise "you would tumble off."

"I love all animals, but horses are my favorite," he said, adding that he hoped to be a professional horseman some day.

"I would like to get more athletes in the games," Ms. Grande said, referring to Special Olym-

pics competitions like the one Alan competed in.

"The horse community on Staten Island is working now on incorporating a Special Olympics class into the regular horse shows in the area.

"I'm happy I had the opportunity to do this. In the beginning I was scared silly seeing all these kids. Now they're all like my own kids. They're no different than anyone else."

In addition to offering the equestrian program for disabled people, the riding academy provides certification training for people who would like to volunteer for the Special Olympics.



Brian Healy looks forward to his ride.



Irene Mucciariello watches as her daughter, Jessica, brushes Nikko. Erica Duryea holds the horse.



With Suzanne Grande looking on, Alan Russo feeds carrots to Diamond Girl.

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