

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.