



Left to right: Some team members of Hope Springs—Vaneisa, Sylvester Stallone's former polo pony; instructor Jeannie Knowlton; volunteer Pauli Brandt; Sir Dudley; Richard Chamositz, Chairman; and Elena Gonzales Shaffer, President & Executive Director

# Horse Therapy Volunteers Reap Many Rewards: *Friendships, Fulfillment, and Fitness and Horsemanship is Not Required*

By Christine Little

There are many volunteer opportunities available in the Delaware Valley, but few as unique as that offered by Hope Springs Equestrian Therapy. Here volunteers help handicapped children and adults cope with their disabilities by learning to ride a horse.

At Hope Springs, volunteers work closely with certified instructors to make horseback riding lessons fun and safe for individuals coping with a variety of physical and emotional handicaps. The lessons build riders' strength and confidence, and teach them that they may not be as limited by their disabilities as they once thought. But for the volunteers, there is an entirely different set of benefits.

"Many of our volunteers get involved because they love being around horses," says Hope Springs founder and executive director, Elena Shaffer. "But many are here because they care about helping people. What they have in common is that they're all

ple with physical disabilities. The horse's slow, rhythmic movement has been shown to help handicapped people improve postural control and balance, stretch contracted muscles, increase muscle strength, and even improve walking ability.

"It's just amazing to see what happens with our riders when they start working with the horses," says Shaffer. "Because they're working so closely with a large animal, our riders gain

confidence as they learn to control the horse. And combined with the physical benefits offered by the movement of riding, it's really wonderful to see them grow and blossom."

Hope Springs is expanding its services to include classes for at-risk youth. These young people crave an outlet for their energy, and working with the horses certainly fulfills that need, within a safe and supportive environ-

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Above: Instructor Jeannie Knowlton works with student Mary O'Connor to adjust the tack before a riding lesson on Gypsy.

looking for a way to give back to the community – to have a positive impact."

Studies show that equestrian therapy – also known as therapeutic riding – is one of the most efficient and effective treatments available for peo-

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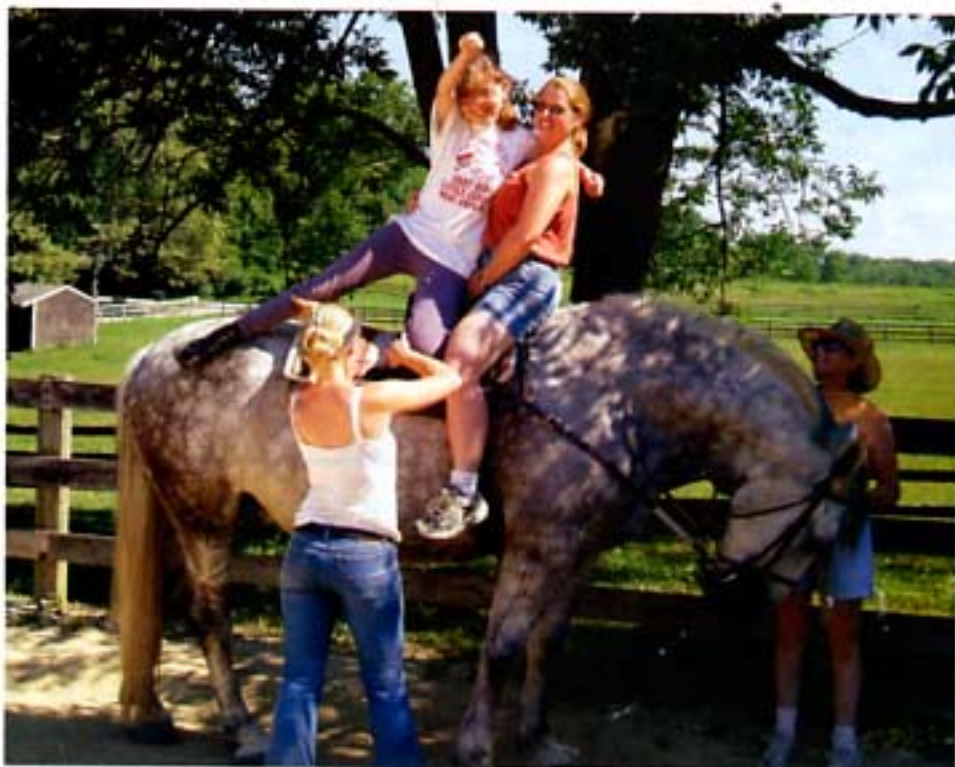
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*Top: Gentle giant Dudley teaches vaulting at summer camp. Student Kristen Chelmsow is supported by instructors Kim Slouf, Ange Bean and Jeannie Knowlton.*

*Above: Instructor Jeannie Knowlton and volunteer Doreen Olkowicz show student Nick Sproll the proper way to tack his horse before the lesson at Hope Springs.*

ment. Hope Springs is actively seeking adult volunteers to help with that program as well.

At Hope Springs Equestrian Therapy, volunteers help the riders groom and saddle their horses. During lessons, volunteers lead or walk beside horse and rider while a certified instructor guides the rider through exercises designed to increase muscle strength and flexibility, while teaching the basics of riding a horse.

"We ask our volunteers to come at the same time each week," says volunteer coordinator Sandra Kumpf. "The riders get to know their volunteers – and they really look forward to seeing them. The relationship the riders form with our volunteers and staff is an important part of their therapy."

"And it goes both ways," Kumpf adds, smiling. "The volunteers get so they know their riders and look forward to seeing them each week, too."

"I started volunteering at Hope Springs because I love horses," says vol-

unteer Pauli Brandt, of Downingtown. "My children are in school, so I was looking for something positive to do with some of my free time. But I come now because I love the kids. It's great to see how their skills improve and their disabilities become less of a handicap as they spend time with the horses. And I can really see that I'm helping them too. I help them feel safe up there, which helps them relax and concentrate on what they need to do to ride."

"We don't ask a whole lot of our volunteers," says Kumpf. "Mostly just their enthusiasm and energy – working with horses is great exercise! We teach the volunteers everything they need to know to be of help to our riders. All we ask is that they commit to at least one lesson each week. That's a minimum of 90 minutes a week."

"If a volunteer can't commit to come at a certain time each week, we have several fundraisers during the year that we need help with. And we can always use people to fill in as substitutes in our lessons."

"If people think they might be interested in volunteering at Hope Springs, I would encourage them to look into it," says Kumpf. "There's nothing like it. And our program simply couldn't exist without our volunteers."

Hope Springs offers lessons Monday through Friday from 2:30 to 7:00 P.M. and Sundays from 12:00 to 5:00 P.M. Training is provided for all volunteers, and no experience is necessary.

For more information about Hope Springs Equestrian Therapy, volunteer opportunities, and upcoming fundraising events, call (610) 827-7001 or visit [www.hope-springs.org](http://www.hope-springs.org).

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